

**CHOOSING**

**FAITH**


DR. DAVID J. LIEPERT



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# CHOOSING FAITH

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Dr. David J. Liepert

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# Foreword

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I have never written a foreword. David did not ask me to write a foreword. In fact, I'm not entirely certain what a foreword actually is or should be! However, for whatever reason, I felt strongly compelled to say something regarding "Choosing Faith".

I do not intend to comment on the author's scholastic approach to his subject, nor do I intend to produce a dissertation critical of the manuscript in the context of similar bodies of work. I do wish to bring to the reader's attention a hint of what is to come (a forewarning may be the most appropriate term) with ideas to foster, appreciation of the arguments presented, and most importantly an understanding of the process.

In this book, David courageously takes us through his journey of self-discovery, but with a twist. Unlike similar stories which begin with ignorance and hypocrisy and ultimately come to a rebirth of sorts, David starts and ends with a daunting fund of knowledge and a strong moral center. Where then is the journey? Where is the conflict that drives an author to write and the reader to read?

In this story you will see anger, oblivion, hope and dread. You will see confusion. You will see joy. You will see a man who struggles with his spiritual masters, asking questions of himself and others about things that he previously had deemed unquestionable. These are not new questions. History is filled with men and women who have wrestled over a lifetime with similar ideas.

What you will see is a very personal account of one man who has chosen from the beginning to walk with God, and who is seeking reconciliation and truth. David takes intellectually strong but spiritually painstakingly fragile steps toward his choice. In reading

this book, I challenge you to walk with David and through his eyes to see what he sees, see what he believes, and wonder.

Robert Perverseff

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## Author's Prelude

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Once assisted in the care of a patient in an Intensive Care Unit who eventually died despite our heroic efforts to the contrary. In the end, although the semblance of life was being maintained by machines moving air in and out of the lungs and pumping blood around the body, the patient's heart, brain and lungs were without independent function. With absolutely no chance of recovery, there was no question that we were prolonging death, not life. As well, with all of our mechanisms and machines we were treating the remains of a human being with unconscionable disrespect.

We expressed this to the patient's family and learned that they were members of a Christian sect who believed very fervently they had been given the power to demand things of God and the right to expect those demands to be fulfilled. They prayed to God and asked that their loved one be returned to life. I recall vividly the confusion, despair and anger they showed when this didn't happen. They were angry at God. They were angry at us. They were angry at our patient, almost as if they thought that her death was her fault. It took many hours of counselling before they could begin to accept that God had the right to say no.

We all pretend that our purpose in the study of religion is to enable us to know, understand and worship God. Perhaps we should also admit that some of us, perhaps most of us, would like to gain some control in that relationship either for this life, or the next. Religions

that claim to grant the ability to influence God are quite popular! Unfortunately, if this is our goal, I don't see how it is possible for us to worship God as Supreme and much greater than ourselves. I think that we inevitably create a God in our own image, diminished enough to allow us to pretend that we can predict and manipulate the actions of our Creator. A Prophet named Moses (Peace Be Upon Him), once asked God to define Gods-self so that he could take this "name" to his people. God's reply was "**I am that I am**".

# First Steps

Not very long ago, I wanted my faith to remain as it always had been. At the time, I was an evangelical Baptist. To me this meant that I believed that Jesus (PBUH) was God Incarnate and that he had died on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins. In return for this, and also because of my obedience in baptism and communion, I received the grace of forgiveness as a gift from God. I was also taught that as an additional benefit of my belief, I would gradually become a better person and, more importantly, a better servant of God as the Holy Spirit changed me from the inside out. I believed with all my heart that this was what was taught by the Bible and that the words of the Bible were literally true, although I understood that it was necessary to consider the context and experiences of the peoples who had been originally addressed. I knew that the Bible was the Word of God to His people.

As a child, I had been raised by my parents to be a Lutheran. During those early years, I wasn't bothered by questions about my doctrine. Actually, I don't even recall that these basic facts and assumptions all Christians are expected to accept had even been identified to me when I was a child. For me, Christianity was going to Church, believing in God as revealed by Jesus and the rest of the Bible, and trying to do what was right. I lived secure in the knowledge that God would love me no matter what I did, as long as I worshipped "Him" and did my best.

Being raised in the family and community in which I was, my religious identity as a Christian was pretty inevitable. Although I knew many people who didn't believe in God at all, they really made little sense to me. I didn't understand how someone's belief or disbelief in God could influence God's existence. It seemed to me that either God was real or He wasn't, independent of what anybody "believed". Since it seemed impossible to me that God would not

exist and since I wanted to be on “His” good side, I looked for information about God from the world around me. I was surrounded by people who claimed to know God and so I listened to them, followed their teaching and accepted their guidance.

I still have vivid memories of my childhood Faith in God. I have seen the word “immanence” used to describe the awareness of God’s presence, and it is generally spoken of as if it is a rare experience that some people try to create within themselves with meditation, drugs or religious ecstasy. Immanence has been a part of my daily life since long before I knew the word, sometimes in the background as a comforting presence, and sometimes otherwise. As a teenager, one evening I was riding my bicycle between two fences along a path when I heard a voice in my ear say, “Duck!” I did, immediately and without thinking. When I stopped to investigate, there was no one visible for hundreds of feet around me, but a fine piano wire had been strung between two fence posts across the path at such a level that it would probably have cut off my head at the speed that I had been riding. Another time, the same voice made me back up in traffic just before a semitrailer drove over the front of my car. My mother tells me that as a pre-school child I frequently reported visits by something I called “The Blue Giant”, a glowing, friendly entity who came by at night to see how I was feeling. I apparently told her that this was my Guardian Angel. An awareness of God and God’s messengers was part of my life before I had any religious knowledge or training.

When I was young, I didn’t need to understand any of this to accept it. My mother said that I welcomed my Blue Giant visits and looked forward to them. The voice that infrequently commanded me was one that I simply obeyed without thinking, sometimes to my confusion and frustration. Once, when I was about sixteen years old, a married woman was obviously making an attempt to seduce me when I simply got up and started to walk away, paralyzed from the waist up, wanting to return but completely unable to control my legs!

None of these events had a life shaking impact on me, nor did I feel any need to share them with others. As I grew up they were easily explained and categorized within Christian doctrine and incorporated into my developing Christianity, subject and subordinate to the religion and theology that I was learning.

I first started to develop difficulties with Christianity when I entered adolescence and began to examine the “Grace of God” as it was taught in the Church that I attended. I had learned that sins were rebellious thoughts or actions of mine that were not part of God’s plan for me, which I should have avoided, but which I instead chose to knowingly and willingly participate in. I had always understood that I was forgiven for all of my sins because of God’s goodness, not my own. Since I knew just what I was capable of, this was reassuring to me. I also understood that my failure to be perfect was inevitable. My teachers said that I had not been made perfect by God and it was only through the work of God that I could ever become better than I was.

In a way, I believed that God was responsible for my imperfections. “Original Sin” (which I understood to be the capacity for sin that came as a consequence of my free will, rather than some leftover guilt from my ancestors) was something God had bequeathed to me simply because I had been born human, not as a result of any decision of my own. Since I thought that my faults before God-my-Judge were a consequence of my existence, and preordained by God-my-Creator, it seemed fair to me that God played a necessary part in, and was in a way responsible for, their correction. I accepted this because I knew how weak-willed I was when it came to choosing between pleasure and righteousness. What was important to me was that I had always been taught that I could unconditionally count on God’s forgiveness and help because of my belief and my baptism. This gave me a certain measure of control over the eventual fate of my soul that my religious instructors later called my “assurance of salvation”.

My problem was that very little was taught about repentance and obedience to God by the people I was listening to. Although this made my faith a very convenient one to practice, it was uncomfortable for me to read the Gospels, because Jesus seemed to stress repentance and obedience very, very strongly. I sometimes found myself in situations where my own behaviour, as well as that of my friends and religious teachers, stood in stark contrast to the behaviour of the men and women of the Bible. I stepped back and watched myself and others and realized that there was little impetus to obey the moral code expressed in the Bible, even though we all professed to follow its teachings. Since we believed that our drive to transgress was inborn and that our salvation was a result of God's direct intervention in our lives, and because forgiveness was assured and God's punishment made impossible by our Faith, most of us generally lived by the prayer: "O God, make me perfect, but not yet!", so that we could continue to live as we wanted, rather than as we knew that we should.

It seemed to me that few people actually took God very seriously. Since we could always count on the mercy of God, we all had little cause to do what we knew was right. I was frequently present at tearful scenes of repentance both preceded and followed by joyful and wanton disobedience. I generally tried to enjoy this sort of life myself. Unfortunately, whenever I actually sat down and read the Bible, I found Jesus condemning just this sort of hypocrisy. Since what I really wanted from my faith was certainty about my future fate and God's judgment, I felt uncomfortable with the apparent contradiction between what the Gospels said and what we, the people of the Church, practiced. I decided to examine the fundamentals of my Faith. I figured that it would be very simple for me to find out where I had gone wrong and to fix it.

After some study, prayer and reflection I decided that I could blame the inconsistencies and problems that I was discovering not on myself, but on my teachers' departure from pure Bible teaching into

broader areas of religious philosophy. The pastor of the church that I was attending at the time, and the people who had taught me my religion, were all very well educated. Because of this, the majority of the lessons to which I was exposed came from sources outside the Bible, even though the Bible was supposed to be the basis of all of our beliefs. Sometimes, it seemed that the Bible verse that was used as the starting point for a class seemed quite far removed from the conclusion that was finally reached. This left me with the uncomfortable feeling that I was relying too heavily on the opinions of others, and not enough on the opinion of God.

I knew that Christianity was supposed to be accessible to anyone, regardless of education. I grew concerned that frequently my pastors and teachers seemed to be showing off their superior intellectual skills and knowledge instead of teaching from the Word. I left the Lutheran Church to seek out a group that focused on scripture straight from the Bible and who had a healthy distrust for intellectual manipulations. I ended up in the Baptist Church.

## My Life as a Baptist

I was very content with the teachings of the Baptists. Instead of de-emphasizing the New Testament writings of Paul and the majority of the Old Testament, as my previous pastors had often done, the leaders in the Baptist Church always based their lessons on a wide variety of Bible verses. I occasionally wished that more of their sermons were based on what Jesus himself had said and done rather than the other sources in scripture, but since I believed that all the writers were in agreement, I had little difficulty with the accepted evangelical Baptist doctrine that Jesus was God, that he had died as a sacrifice for my sins and that I became acceptable to God when I repented and accepted this. Except for much less being said by my



instructors about the doctrine of the Trinity (the belief-that God manifested Himself to the world in three ways: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit), I found this to be little different from my previous beliefs! The difference that was important to me was that obedience to God was not de-emphasized at all, which seemed to me much more compatible with what Jesus had said in the Gospels.

As a Baptist, I was expected to succeed in living a righteous life, with God's help. The Law which we had to obey was, however, quite different from what was often called Old Testament Law. The Baptists taught that we had to obey God in baptism, in professing our faith, and in worship. Day to day righteousness was still a Gift from God through the Holy Spirit. However, although I did not earn my salvation by my actions, good works were a sign of God's Spirit working in me and gave further assurance of my forgiveness. I thought that was great! The expectation that I would do good with God's help, rather than fail despite divine guidance and support, was very reassuring to me. Even better was the knowledge that in simply choosing to do good, I further confirmed God's approval of me. Coincidentally, I had come to a time in my life where I quite simply had fewer opportunities to be tempted, and so avoiding sin was less of a strain than it had been previously.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, as a Lutheran and then as a Baptist, the central components of the doctrine of Christianity as I had come to understand them were the same. I believed that "Christian" Faith was the ability to believe that Jesus was God and had died as a perfect sacrifice for my sins, and that by repenting, admitting my sinful nature and accepting that this sacrifice was for me personally, I received God's forgiveness. This special Faith was both a gift from God and a confirmatory sign that gave me assurance of forgiveness for my sins and an eternal life of bliss in Heaven, as well as God's help in obedience. In addition, it was a special code that set those of us who believed it apart from others who didn't. Because we knew who God really was, we had

assurances of power, protection and absolution that people with a different religion from us didn't receive, no matter how much trust they placed in God. In this way, as I studied, Christian doctrine had become linked to my Faith, without my noticing.

Since my "Faith in God" had become indistinguishable from my acceptance of the doctrine of evangelical Christianity, I became afraid that any uncertainty would be construed as a sign of my faith's weakness. All of us knew that strong faith was good, and that weak faith led to failure and hellfire! I therefore eventually became both emotionally and intellectually incapable of closely examining my own beliefs. I was afraid that questioning could easily become damnation if it went too far. As long as I never questioned, I was certain that God would have to forgive my faults and accept me into Heaven when I died. This illusion that I had, of my control over my fate on Judgment Day, was basically the same whether I lived by Lutheran or Baptist teachings.

In the end, although I remained convinced that I lived by Faith (with a capital "F") as I was commanded by the Bible, the faith that I had was in the saving power of my belief, not the Justice or Mercy of God. Even when I considered the people of the Old Testament whom the Bible said had been "saved by their Faith" like Abraham, the other Christians with whom I associated and I generally assumed that this meant they all had had an opportunity to acknowledge the correctness of Christian doctrine, the divinity of Jesus and the universal nature of His sacrifice before the time of their own Judgment, and that it was the acceptance of this sacrifice that had resulted in their forgiveness.

In all honesty, even while I was going through my first theological crisis as a Lutheran, I had never thought to question the validity of the things that I had been taught in my Christian studies about God. I knew that Christianity and its various interlocking beliefs, explanations and assumptions had been developed over the centuries by many wise Christians in an ongoing process of revelation, study

and prayer. I knew that Faith was a gift from God. At the time, I believed, as I have said, that Faith was the acceptance of these Christian doctrines. I was convinced that these three statements were not only true but that they were in some fashion interdependent – that the human factor introduced with the intellectual development of Christianity was somehow necessary and inevitable and a further sign of God’s beneficence and blessing.

I realized one day that I did not fear God. Quite to the contrary, I believed that God was my friend! In Sunday School for my whole life, whether Lutheran or Baptist, I had been taught that God had come to earth as Jesus and had sacrificed Himself for me personally so that I would not have to suffer the penalty for my wrong actions. I wasn’t even responsible for the really hard work of obedience to God’s Law, because I knew that God would take care of that through the Holy Spirit in “His” own time! Until then, as long as I meant well and professed the correct creed, I could do pretty much whatever I felt I couldn’t help doing. I didn’t know what I could possibly be afraid of. I had developed a rationalization where I avoided sin and tried to do what was right not because I feared God but because I pitied Jesus. I saw this as proof of the Holy Spirit working within me. I imagined that every wrong thing that I did added to Jesus’ suffering on the cross, and I tried to avoid doing ill to limit that pain. Far from fearing God, I thought that I felt sorry for Him.

I considered myself to be reasonably intelligent. I knew that Solomon (PBUH), one of the wisest of men, had taught that fear of God was the beginning of Wisdom. Although, as a Christian, I told myself that I had passed beyond fear into a real knowledge of God, I wanted to be wise because I figured that it would be a good thing to be. Knowing that it had worked for Solomon, I asked for Wisdom from God. I actually thought that God would somehow confirm to me that I was right about everything and maybe make me rich as well!

Instead, my marriage of nine years fell apart as my wife left me for my first best friend, my work as a physician became a source of

anxiety and stress to me when people started to plan on shutting down the Hospital at which I practiced (leaving me without a job!), all but one friend decided to side with my soon to be ex-wife, and a tree fell on my car. The first thing that I learned very quickly in the midst of this was how to laugh at myself and at the arrogance of my assumption that I knew anything about being wise. Strangely, at no time did I doubt that God was working in my life, nor did I feel cursed, just chastened.

I had always known Muslims, although I tended to think of them as “Mohammedans”, and I believed that they thought of their Prophet in the same way that I thought of Jesus. I had actually taken some short classes in comparative world religions in the course of my religious instruction and was quite convinced that I knew everything significant about Islam. I believed Muslims were wrong, but otherwise I really gave their faith little thought.

Suddenly, I noticed that I was surrounded by Muslims. New friends, colleagues and respected mentors whose faith I had paid little attention to all turned out to follow Islam. I was astonished by their goodness, their devotion to their God and their obedience to the teachings of their Book, even though I thought that the Book itself was false. I was particularly impressed by the fact that they all prayed five times a day!

## Bringing Light to the Heathen

I decided that if I really cared about them, I would have to change my Muslim friends into Christians. Since I made no distinction between faith and doctrine, I felt that by correcting their system of belief, I would be saving Muslim souls from the eternal torment of hell! I knew that although they were concerned about variations in the Bible’s translation, Muslims still revered the Bible

and considered it to have been divinely inspired. I knew as well that Muslims sought to worship and serve the God of Abraham (PBUH), the same God as Christians and Jews did. I was certain that it would be easy to find in the Bible the specific chapters and verses that would show my friends where they had been taught incorrectly and so lead them to true knowledge and faith in Jesus (PBUH). My task seemed to become even easier to me when I discovered that Jesus was already given the titles of Messiah and Christ in the book of Islam, the Holy Quran. Muslims, in my opinion, were all only one step away from Christianity!

The first thing I did was read an English translation of the meaning of their Book. I still remember the fear that I felt every day when I would sit down, prepared for spiritual combat. I expected with every turn of a page that I would read some horrible blasphemy that would test my faith. Instead, I saw worship and respect for God and the teachings of all of the Prophets. I had always been taught that “Allah” was the name of a false God, but one of the first things I learned was that to Muslims, “Allah” simply meant “The Lord” and that Muslims gave no more reverence to this name than they did to any of God’s other titles, such as “The Most Gracious” or “The Most Merciful”. In fact, I learned that some Muslim scholars had recommended in the past that “Allah” not be used to refer to God at all in any language but Arabic. This had been done in an attempt to avoid exactly what had happened; non-Muslims believing that Muslims thought that “Allah” was God’s name! I remember thinking that the more I learned, the easier converting Muslims to Christianity seemed to become!

The first Prayer that I read, instead of being some Satanic invocation, said simply:

*“In the name of Allah, Most Gracious and Most Merciful  
Praise be to Allah, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds:  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment.  
Thee do we worship, and Thine Aid we seek.*

*Show us the straight way,  
The way of those on whom Thou has bestowed Thy Grace.  
Those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray."*

(Surah 1: 1-7 "The Opening")

I was surprised. If I substituted "The Lord" for "Allah" as I was supposed to do, this prayer seemed the most "Christian" of supplications. This first surah even talked about Grace, a concept that I was very familiar with from my Christian education. Since I was sure that I knew everything that I needed to know on the subject of God's Grace, I concluded that Muslims simply didn't understand their own book and just needed to have it explained to them by someone familiar with the Bible, like me.

My experience every day was the same. Instead of finding the blasphemy that I had expected, I found love, prayer, supplication, yearning and respect. I had always been taught that Islam was a cruel, fatalistic and judgmental religion, with little love, hope or forgiveness. Expecting to find proof of this, I instead found verses like Surah 2: 2-5: *"This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah; who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them; and who believe in the Revelation sent to thee, and sent before thy time, and (in their hearts) have assurance of the Hereafter. They are on (true Guidance), from their Lord, and it is these who will prosper."* This verse even talked about "assurance of the Hereafter", which confused me because I knew as a Christian that this came only to those with the correct doctrine.

When I read Surah 39: 53: *"Say: 'Oh my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives All sins, for he is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.'"* and Surah 4: 110: *"If anyone does evil or wrongs his own soul but afterwards seeks Allah's forgiveness, he will find Allah Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful"*, I thought that rather than confirming a rigid or cruel Judgment, they seemed to promise the same sort of

forgiveness that Christians received, the forgiveness that I knew came only from belief in the doctrines of Christianity.

Instead of the fatalism and predestination that I had expected, I found Surah 2: 21: *“O ye people! Adore your Guardian Lord, who created you and those who came before you that ye may become righteous”* and Surah 58: 22: *“Thou wilt not find any people who believe in Allah and the Last day, loving those who resist Allah and His Messenger, even though they were their fathers or their sons, or their brothers, or their kindred. For such He has written Faith in their hearts and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself. And He will admit them to Gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein (forever). Allah will be well pleased with them, and they with Him. They are the Party of Allah. Truly it is the Party of Allah that will achieve Felicity.”*

When I read them, both of these verses made it seem that in Islam, perfection was not required and that according to the Quran, Muslims “became” righteous just as I believed that Christians did. As well, they were promised strength and help from God’s Spirit just as I believed Christians were! I remember my feeling of astonishment at how all this faith was being squandered at the feet of a false God. I became even more convinced that Muslims were somehow a people arrested in the process of becoming Christian and that their doctrine only needed to be corrected in a few small points, with my help.

Having resolved to find a way to reform Islam, I embarked upon a careful and organized review of everything that Jesus had taught. I was sure that this was all that would be necessary to convince a Muslim of the correctness of Christianity, since I was convinced that this was the basis of my own faith! Although in my previous studies of the Bible I had experienced some discomfort when encountering verses like Mark 10:18: **“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good – except God alone.”** or Matthew 5:17-19: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until**

heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” I had always been able to shrug off these apparent contradictions to my beliefs. The first verse, I had come to understand, was an example of Jesus’ teasing that could only be comprehended by someone who already knew that Jesus was God. It was always a pleasure to laugh with other Christians at this example of a divine sense of humour! When reading the second verse, I had been taught to focus on the word “fulfill”, and to believe that Jesus meant that since he had “fulfilled” the Law, none of the rest of us had to. I just ignored the subsequent verses or assumed that they applied to people with a different doctrine than my own.

Another passage that had given me a lot of anxiety when I read it was Matthew 7:21-23: **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”**, but I accepted the assurances of my leaders that this probably referred to the Mormons and could therefore be ignored safely by the rest of us. I had always believed that taken as a whole, the Bible supported Christian doctrine fully. I believed that following Christian doctrine was the path to pleasing God, so when I needed to prove this to Muslims, I went to the Bible for support.

Because I have written this book, you can probably surmise that my search was not successful in the way that I had expected. I had never studied the Bible in its entirety, seeking to support Christianity as “The Faith”, since I had assumed that this work had been done many times by others. When I finally embarked on my own exhaustive study of the Bible and what it taught, I found some verses



I had not read before and having found them, I rediscovered others that I felt I had never understood properly. As I continued my review, I recalled the many times in Bible study that the leader would say things like “What Jesus really meant when he said this was...”, and I remembered my own lack of concern at this sort of commonplace re-interpretation. I learned some of what it was that the Bible actually said to me, and I learned what I believe are some of the ways that the Bible has been made to serve Christian Doctrine instead of itself being served by the Church, as it should have been.

## The Divinity of Jesus

From the start, I was pretty sure that everyone would agree that the major point of doctrinal conflict between Christianity and Islam was over whether Jesus was God. It was here that I resolved to make my first attack on the religion of Islam. I felt that a direct approach would show confidence and improve my credibility. I had absolutely no doubt that Jesus was God and I was certain that this belief was fully supported by scripture. The Bible was full of verses calling Jesus the “**Son of God**”, and I had always concluded that this meant that he must be divine.

The phrase “**Son of God**” occurred thirty-eight times in the New Testament of my computerized New American Standard Revised Version of the Bible. In seven of these occurrences, however, it was uttered by either Satan or other “unclean spirits”, none of whom would be likely to convince a Muslim! One of the first “clean” verses that I went to in my Bible came with a bit of a surprise. According to the footnotes in my New International Version (NIV) Bible, Mark 1:1 in the earliest manuscripts did not refer to Jesus as the Son of God. This had been apparently added to the Gospel later. I decided that I couldn’t in good conscience use Mark 1:1. Although it was tempting to just

gloss over this “minor” point, I knew that many of my Muslims friends knew a surprising amount about the Bible and that my credibility would suffer if they caught me in even the least appearance of a lie.

I was a little surprised to find that Gabriel, in Luke 1:35, had only said that Jesus would be “**called the Son of God**” and that he would be “**given the Throne of David**” (Luke 1:32) to “**rule the House of Jacob forever**” (Luke 1:33). This declaration was somehow less emphatic and universal than I had remembered. Interestingly, I discovered that Luke 3:38 actually said that Adam was the “**Son of God**”! I wasn’t sure what to make of this, but since it obviously didn’t strengthen my argument I ignored it, left it for future personal consideration, and looked further. Later in that book, the priests questioned Jesus, saying, “**Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?**” and Jesus replied, “**You say that I am.**” This response again lacked the conviction I needed and seemed inadequate to prove my point to someone who didn’t already agree with me.

I found that the Gospel of John contained a greater number of references to Jesus as the “**Son of God**” than any of the other gospels. Jesus, speaking in the third person, talked about the “**Son of God**” in John 3:17, and in John 5:25 and 11:4. Martha, one of Jesus’ followers, called him “**the Messiah, the Son of God**” in John 11:27 and he was called “**the Messiah, the Son of God**” again in John 20:31 by the author. Unfortunately, and to my frustration, I couldn’t find an unequivocal verse that said that Jesus as the Son of God was divine in any of the Gospels.

I was trying to refute the Holy Quran, which said in Surah 4: 171: *“O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: It will be better for you: For Allah is One God: Glory be to Him: (Far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And*

*enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs.*” It was impossible for me to think of a way that this quote could be a more emphatic denunciation of the belief that Jesus was God. I knew that I had to find an equally strong and emphatic confirmation of Jesus’ divinity in the Bible before I could have any hope whatsoever of convincing Muslims that this was even what the Bible said, let alone that it was correct.

I had been struck by two different thoughts in my reflections on all of the references to Jesus as the Son of God. The first was the frequent linkage of his declared son-ship to his role as the Messiah. The second was the realization that if the term “Son of God” itself necessarily implied divinity, then Christianity would have to acknowledge many other “sons” as Gods as well. Adam was called “**Son of God**” in the book of Luke during the recitation of Jesus’ genealogy, and Psalm 82:6 referred to the entire house of Israel as being “**God’s and the Sons of God**”. Paul himself said in Romans 8:14: “**because those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God.**” By now, having reread every Gospel verse that contained “**Son of God**”, I realized that they would not be enough to establish his divinity to Muslims. I decided that I would have to learn more about the word “Messiah” in order to better explain the meaning of the phrase.

When I began this next phase of my Bible search, I was still what I considered to be a Christian. I was attending church regularly and participating in a weekly Bible study. I had found no reason to question my doctrine, and therefore my Faith was unchanged. Although I was a little frustrated and confused by my lack of progress so far, I was undaunted in my search for Biblical support for my Christian beliefs and convinced that my failure to find sufficiently convincing evidence for Jesus’ divinity in the title “Son of God” was my own fault, and likely due to trying to go too far in one step.

I decided that it would be much easier to find the verses that showed that Jesus was “The Messiah” and then find the ones that proved that “The Messiah” was God. Instead of using solely the Gospels, this meant that I would have to expand my study to encompass some of the

Old Testament. When I thought about it, this seemed to be the correct thing to do. I knew that I would benefit from a more complete reading of the Bible, and I felt quite certain that my arguments would have much more weight with Muslims, coming as they would from the combined teachings of Judaism and Christianity. I still had complete certainty that I already knew what I was going to find. I had never considered the possibility of anything less than success. I knew that, having asked God, I would be provided with everything that I needed.

## The Nature of the Messiah

The first thing that I was reminded was that Messiah only means “anointed”. Cyrus, the King of the Medes and Persians was actually described in Isaiah 45:1 as being the “anointed” of God and could therefore have been considered “a” Messiah. Priests and Prophets and Kings were all anointed. Just being one of this group was a great honour shared by a relatively small proportion of the people of the Old Testament. However, “The Messiah” was something different. I expected that it was this difference that I was looking for, and so I dove into the inquiry with a great sense of excitement and anticipation.

According to my copy of *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, the Jews prior to Jesus hoped for a prophesied ruler whose reign would bring everlasting justice, peace and security. The prophecies thought to refer to him included Isaiah 11:1-3: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will be on him- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord- and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.”, Jeremiah 33:14-18: “ ‘The days are coming’, declares the Lord ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of

**Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.' For this is what the Lord says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offering and to present sacrifices'", as well as Ezekiel 37:24-28: "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them, it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever", Genesis 49:10: "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" and Numbers 24:17-19: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."**

None of these verses gave me any indication that the Messiah would be God Incarnate. In fact, one of the most important prophecies, the first half of which is quoted in the New Testament as if it refers directly to Jesus and his divine origins, was really completely incompatible with a divine Messiah. In 2 Samuel 7:11-15, the prophet Nathan tells King David: **"The Lord declares to you**

**that the Lord Himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son.”** In the New Testament book of Hebrews, the quote stops there. In the book of Samuel, it continues: **“When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.”**

Although the first half of Nathan’s prophecy, the part found in the New Testament, could be construed as saying that Jesus was God’s son, the rest, if the prophecy referred to Jesus, appeared to say that he would sin and be punished by God with floggings inflicted by men. The title “Son of God”, if based on this verse, seemed to be more a matter of adoption than a declaration of divine origin. God couldn’t sin! It seemed worse than dishonest to me that the second part of the prophecy had been omitted from the New Testament and had never been taught to me in my Christian studies, as there was obviously no reason to separate the sentences originally.

I read, reread and thought about these verses, and however I looked at them, it was still evident to me that the Messiah they predicted could not have been a manifestation of God on earth. Quite to the contrary, to fulfill the prophecies, he would have had to be both human and fallible. The Old Testament said that he would be given as a gift from God the Spirit of Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Power, Knowledge and the Fear of the Lord and that despite this, he would still do wrong and be punished. I tried for a while to convince myself that human fallibility was just one of the characteristics that God had had to take on to become fully human. I actually had a few people whom I trusted assure me that God had to become fallible to understand humanity!! Even then, the conception seemed ludicrous to me – that God could have created mankind at the beginning of our

time on earth and yet not have understood everything about us.

I probably could have stuck to my old beliefs and decided that somehow God had taken upon Himself the ability to sin and to deserve punishment – except for one thing. According to these verses, all the Bible said was that the Messiah was a human descendant of David who would be established by God to reign on earth over God's people. Try as I might, I couldn't find any verse in the Old or New Testament that said that I had to say or believe that the Messiah would be God. I started to wonder why everyone I knew had always insisted that Christians had to believe what we did.

Still trying to hold on, I broadened my search, looking for anything that I might have misconstrued. In the Bible, I could find verses where God described Himself as a shepherd, and others where He said that He would appoint the Messiah as a shepherd, but never that He would be that shepherd. The Bible spoke of many shepherds for Israel, only one of whom would be the Messiah. In the end, I had to accept that the prophecies of the Old Testament were quite clear; though the Messiah would be divinely appointed and supported, he would also be a human being whom God promised to treat like a son and punished when punishment was necessary, but from whom God would not take away His love.

By now, I was understandably quite upset. These Bible passages completely contradicted everything that I had been taught to believe about Jesus. I wasn't sure if I had misunderstood or simply misapplied what I had read. Instead of giving up, I searched harder for verses that would support my belief that Jesus as Messiah had to be God Incarnate.

Some Bible translations that I found quoted the Old Testament as though it said clearly that the Messiah was God. In my New American Standard Revised Version translation the writer of Hebrews quoted a verse from the Psalms in Hebrews 1:5: **"You are my Son; today I have begotten you."** Placed in the context of the book of Hebrews, the verse seemed to support the doctrine that Jesus was the begotten Son of

God. I really wanted to believe that this was sufficient to show that Jesus was divine. However, when I looked, I couldn't find the passages where the Bible said God-hood was hereditary.

I don't remember when I first began to ask myself why calling Jesus the **"Son of God"** meant that he had to be God himself. Although Greek and Roman mythology taught that the begotten sons of gods were themselves at least partially divine, when I actually considered it, this concept seemed basically incompatible with monotheism. I knew that many of the early fathers of the Church had some background in polytheism, since they had been raised and educated in a Greco-Roman culture. Out of respect for them, I could almost bring myself to believe that incorporating this into my own faith was all right, and that maybe those ancient Greek storytellers had known something all along. However, I knew in my heart that using polytheistic mythology to shore up Christianity was fundamentally wrong.

In fact, I found that the verse quoted, Psalm 2:7 said: **"I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: he said to me, 'you are my Son; today I have become your Father.'"** The footnotes of my *New International Version* said that the verse could be translated either as **'become your Father'** or as **'begotten you'** into English and, I suppose, Greek. Apparently, there was conceptually no difference in the original language. In my NIV, they were both translated in the fashion of the Psalm. If I understood the verse as **"become your Father"**, it seemed to speak of adoption and exaltation. That God would choose to treat a servant as if he was a son said a lot about God's mercy, but little about that servant.

I was frustrated because it seemed unlikely to me that the word "begotten" or its connotation of divinity was intended. The voice speaking in Psalm 2:7 had already been born. As I understood it, the act of **"begetting"** was linked to the moment of conception, not some event that occurred after birth. It was not simply an acknowledgment. However, it is only when the words are understood and translated as **"begotten You"** that this verse becomes a support for the doctrine that



the Messiah was the begotten Son of God and therefore, at least by the rules of Greek and Roman polytheism, divine.

## The Claims of Jesus

By this point in my search, I recall being in something of a panic. Neither the verses in the Bible about Jesus being the Son of God, nor the prophecies of the Messiah, could be used to support a claim of Jesus' divinity. There was a world of difference between **"he will be called the Son of God"**, as Gabriel proclaimed in Luke 1:35, and **"he will be the Son of God"**, as I had generally understood. There was even more difference between these phrases and **"he will be God in human flesh"**, which was the doctrine I had been trying to justify. If Jesus was, as he claimed, the **"one anointed to preach Good News to the poor"** prophesied by Isaiah, and the Messiah as he was proclaimed by Gabriel, the apostles, himself and the rest of the New Testament, then according to the verses I had found in the Old Testament, he could not have been God. I began to look frantically for those verses that I could use to prove that Jesus had to be the divine, begotten Son of God. The Gospel According to John had always been used by my teachers to answer this sort of question, so I looked to it to help me.

When I discussed this with my mother, a verse that she used to support Jesus' divinity was: **"I tell you the truth', Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was boru, I am!'"**, found in John 8:58. This is generally read by Christians as a strong declaration by Jesus of his God-hood, because of his use of the phrase **"I am"**, the name by which God had identified himself to Moses. In my studies, I had become quite used to looking at things as objectively as I could, trying to examine them from the perspective of the unconvinced. Because of this, I had to ask myself whether this verse could honestly

be construed to say that Jesus had said that he was God. Many individuals in the Bible had been witness to many things that are not normally seen by mortals, but they were not thought to have been divine. Also, according to my copy of *The Complete Gospels*, edited by Robert J. Miller, a more accurate translation didn't end in **"I am"** but instead said: **"As God is my witness, I existed before there was an Abraham."**

Another verse that many used was: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."** To my frustration, when I looked at it carefully, I found that John 3:16 really didn't define which belief it meant: Jesus as God, Jesus as Messiah, or Jesus as Prophet. I was initially a little heartened to find another reference to Jesus as God's begotten son until I researched the history of the verse and found that it had been modified in the fourth century by Jerome.

Early in the history of the Christian Church, a popular Christian leader named Arius, from the city of Alexandria, had argued his belief that the Bible taught that Jesus was created, not begotten. This later became known as the Arian Heresy, and his followers were brutally suppressed by the Christian Church. After the conflict was decided, and to consolidate belief, Jerome took the original version of John 3:16, which used the word **"monogenes"** meaning "unique" or "special", and changed the word to **"unigenitus"**, which meant **"only begotten"**. So instead of finding my faith in contemporary Christian interpretation strengthened by John 3:16, I learned that this verse offered proof of the disrespect shown in the interpretation of the Bible by the early Fathers of the Church.

Yet another argument that I thought I could use to prove that Jesus had claimed that he was God was based on the verses in the book of John where Jesus says that he and God are one. These included John 10:38: **"But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father"**, and John 14:10: **"Don't you know that I am in the**

**Father, and that the Father is in me?** The words that I say to you are not my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” I had thought that these verses could prove Jesus’ divinity by implication, since it seemed that for God to be in Jesus and Jesus to be in God, they both had to be the same being.

Unfortunately, this line of reasoning failed. Jesus had also said in John 14:20: **“On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”** If Jesus had been claiming divine status on the basis of God’s being in him and his being in God, then, I asked myself, why would he have said that his disciples also lived inside him and he inside them? I had to admit that if Jesus’ reference to he and God being in each other meant that Jesus was divine, then this would have had to apply to the disciples and the rest of us as well.

I decided to read everything else that John had written in the New Testament in an attempt to understand what he had meant by “in”. It turned out that he was quite explicit in 1 John 2:5-6: **“But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.”** I concluded that John had intended living ‘in’ God to mean following God’s commands and conforming one’s behaviour to that of Jesus.

I then read John 17:22-23: **“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one; I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”** This verse seemed initially to be potentially fruitful, since in it Jesus states that he and God are “one”. With the eye of hope, it also seemed to make a distinction between two sorts of “oneness”; that of the followers of Jesus amongst themselves, and that between Jesus and God. I did a little research and found out that there were actually two words for the concept “one” in Greek! One of the words, “*heis*”, described the numerical concept of “one”; the other, “*hen*”, apparently meant a unity of essence! I thought with excitement that if Jesus were

recorded as having made a distinction between his “one-ness” with God and his followers’ “oneness” amongst themselves, then this verse would be a strong declaration on Jesus’ part of his own divine nature.

To my disappointment, in John chapters 10 and 17, the same word was used throughout, and it was “heis”, not “hen”. Jesus had not differentiated between the two different sorts of “oneness”. Upon careful and objective rereading, I realized that John 17:22-23 was a prayer by Jesus that all believers would have the same relationship to God as Jesus had.

I eventually had to accept that all of these mystical, difficult verses could not be used to prove that Jesus had said that he was God. If they had been declarations of his divinity, they would have had to apply to the rest of us as well as to Jesus himself. There are many ways in which different individuals can be joined as “one”. Couples joined in marriage are described as becoming “one” in flesh, probably denoting the sex act, and also (“one” hopes!) “one” in their purpose and goals. Individuals in agreement over some undertaking or disputed point are described as well as being “one”. Neither of these “ones” connotes or denotes identity. In the Gospel of John, oneness did not mean sameness.

There were other stories that I looked at as well, in hope and desperation. In one of them, Jesus told his disciples that if they saw him, then they saw the Father as well. Near to that group of verses was another where Jesus had told his disciples that if they accepted a little child, then they also accepted him. Since Jesus obviously didn’t mean that the child was God, or that he was that child, I had to concede that this was not a declaration of divinity. I had always been taught that by doing good things for others, I was allowing them to see Jesus in me, and I knew that I wasn’t God! In verse after verse after verse, the pattern was the same. What I wanted to believe seemed to have always clouded my interpretation of what Jesus had actually said. Since I had known all along that my only hope of

proving the correctness of my beliefs to my Muslim friends had been in finding an incontrovertible verse where either Jesus, an Angel or a Prophet had declared Jesus to be God, I became despondent.

It would be fair at this point to ask why I had been clinging so hard to my need to support Christian doctrine, in the face of my finding so much accumulated evidence that it was false. When I had started to review the Bible, I had been completely convinced that my beliefs were exactly what the Bible taught. This had been my confirmation that my Faith was correct and approved by God, and also my confirmation that it could actually deliver on its promise of eternal peace with God in Heaven. Some of my Pastors and teachers liked to say that if Jesus were not God, then he had to be a liar or a madman. I knew that he was neither. Everyone who I had ever learned from had said that the claims that Jesus had made and the things that he had said could not be true unless he was God. Now I had found that when I actually read the Bible, it really only said that he had been a man, strengthened by a Spirit from God. If this was true, then I couldn't see how I could have any faith in anything that I had been taught. My beliefs had given my Faith a form that I could understand, and I had always believed that form to be founded in the Bible. Now, although I still wanted to believe in God, I didn't know how I could.

I had been convinced that my Faith was founded on the certain knowledge that Jesus was both Messiah and God Incarnate, that sin could not be forgiven without sacrifice, and that it was Jesus' perfection and substitutional sacrifice for all mankind that had facilitated my own reconciliation with God. Although I continued to believe that Faith was sent from God, the doctrine that I followed was almost inextricably linked to that gift. I now had proof that the Biblical Messiah had to be human and fallible. The problem was that I believed that the New Testament taught that Jesus was God. John 1:1-2 said: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."** I knew that these verses said that Jesus was God, because one of Jesus'

titles was “**the Word of God**”.

I had been excited when, in my reading, I had discovered that Jesus’ being the Word was even confirmed in Islam! Surah 4: 171 said: “*People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not ‘Trinity’: desist.*” Although this verse contradicted much of Christian doctrine, particularly the entire concept of the Trinity, it had supported my beliefs in that one essential point. Now I was faced with a blatant contradiction between the Old and the New Testaments, a contradiction that was even supported by the Holy Quran, and I was afraid that this contradiction would completely destroy my ability to believe in Christian doctrine, and therefore would have to destroy my Faith in God as well. It was hard to have trusted in the Church for so long and then to realize that I had been being lied to, even unintentionally. At some point, someone must have known what was going on! Knowing that I had been lying to myself made it even harder to accept.

## The Spirit of Wisdom

I knew that I had to find out what “**Word**” meant. I looked it up in my *Oxford Companion to the Bible* and found that “**Word**” and “**Wisdom**” were synonymous in Jewish thought at the time of Jesus. The *Oxford Companion* directed me to the book of Proverbs, where I found Proverbs 8:22-30 (in which Wisdom is speaking): “**The Lord brought me forth at the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains were settled in**

place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side.” I also found Proverbs 3:19-20: “By Wisdom the Lord laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew.”

My introduction to the Spirit of Wisdom as the first of God’s creations came as quite a shock! These verses described a created being who could fulfill the criteria set by the opening to the Gospel of John and yet not be God. If this was true, then I only had to reject a misinterpretation, something that I found vastly preferable to rejecting every Prophet in the Bible and my own Faith in God. I started to review everything that I could find about Wisdom in various translations and my *Oxford Companion*. The *Oxford Companion* led me to two books of Apocrypha termed “Wisdom Literature”. The following apocryphal quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Jesus ben Sira was reportedly a devout Jew of Jerusalem who had lived about two centuries before Jesus Christ. The book he wrote, ‘Sirach’ or ‘Ecclesiasticus’, was included in all editions of the Bible up to the time of the Reformation, when it was excluded from Protestant and Calvinist texts. According to my *Oxford Companion*, the grounds for this exclusion had been that only Greek translations were available at that time and that its canonicity had been therefore somewhat questionable. Since then, Hebrew versions have been found at Qumran and Masada, and because of this, the exclusion seemed to me to be invalid. In the book, Wisdom proclaims in Sirach 24:1-12: “**Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and**

in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: ‘I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss. Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway. Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide? Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said: ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.’ Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain. I took root in an honoured people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.’”

Another book of the Apocrypha, “The Wisdom of Solomon”, written by an anonymous Jewish scholar, was also part of the Canon of the Bible until the time of the Reformation. The Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-27 reads: “For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing evil gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of His goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.”

I remember feeling quite angry that no one had ever mentioned the creation story in Proverbs to me before, or anything else about the Spirit of Wisdom, because “she” was quite able to fill the role of the “Word” spoken of at the beginning of the Gospel of John and not be God. In fact, it seemed quite unlikely that the Gospel actually intended any other meaning. The phrase: “**and the Word was God. He was with God at the beginning**” had always confused me because I had never understood how the Word could both be God and be with God at the same time. I had always supposed that this verse had been the



foundation of the concept of God being three persons in one being, the doctrine of the Trinity. Reading these books, it was easy to see how the Spirit of Wisdom, as a reflection and image of God, and a pure emanation from Him, could be said to “be” God. Wisdom was made of God’s goodness and power. It would have been as normal to say that Wisdom was God as it would be to say that salt was a spice, or two a number, without meaning that all spices are salt, or that all numbers are two. Based on Ecclesiasticus, I could imagine the excitement of the Jewish theologians as they watched and waited for a sign that Wisdom had been manifested amongst them, as had been prophesied.

After I realized this, I was still confused, but very excited as well. I didn’t know what to do, where to go, what to think or whom to talk to. One thing that I noticed immediately was that the feeling of panic I had felt earlier had by now pretty much disappeared. It seemed that I was very close to some real breakthrough in understanding. Jesus, indwelt and supported by the Spirit of Wisdom, could have fulfilled the prophecies and records of the Bible and yet not be God.

I reread the Book of Proverbs with The Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach, and then all of John’s writings and the rest of the Gospels. I realized that there was no contradiction between what the Old and New Testaments said about Jesus’ relationship to God. Jesus was not God, or a liar, or a madman! The declarations at the beginning of the Gospel of John did not have to be construed as declarations of Jesus’ divinity. They could mean that John believed that the Spirit sent by God to Jesus had been the Spirit of Wisdom, the Spirit of Prophecy, sent to all prophets, and another of God’s creations. If this had been the intention of the writer, then the conflict between Old and New Testament had never existed!

The doctrine of the Trinity as it had been taught to me said that the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the Father were all aspects of the same divine, eternal, uncreated, One God. Although I had tried long and hard, I couldn’t find any verse in the Bible that actually said that this was true. In these “Wisdom” books, I had found that doctrine refuted.

The Spirit of Wisdom was God's first creation, uttered as "Word" or "Breath" and then participating with God in the rest of Creation. Wisdom of Solomon 7:22 said: **"For wisdom, the Fashioner of all things, taught me."** If The Spirit of Wisdom was the Holy Spirit, and if John had taught that this Spirit was the one seen to descend on Jesus at his baptism, then everything else recorded to have been said by Jesus and written in the Gospel according to John made sense. John 1:32-33 said: **"Then John (the Baptist) gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'"**

## Jesus as a Divine Sacrifice

As a Christian, I had been taught that Jesus was perfect and had been without sin throughout his life. I also had believed that he was God, that he had died for me and that his voluntary self-sacrifice on the Cross absolved me of all of my sins. We all had believed that it was only because he had been both flawless man and perfect God that he could have been the sacrifice that brought about the forgiveness of all the wrong the rest of the world had done. I now knew that this was not possible. Though he was Messiah, the prophets of the Old Testament, the angels and Jesus had not said that he was God. The prophecies of the Messiah had said that Jesus would be fallible, would be punished and then would be forgiven. I could no longer consider Mark 10:18: **"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good – except God alone"** to be an example of God's teasing sense of humour. Jesus had been telling the truth all along!

I was left wondering what the implications of Jesus' crucifixion and assumption into heaven actually were, and wondering as well

how I should find out. There was no question in my heart that some benefit did accrue to those who actually followed Jesus' teachings, nor was this questioned by my Muslim friends. The Holy Quran said in Surah 3: 55: *"Behold! Allah said: 'O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make those Who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: Then shall ye all return unto me, and I will judge between you of the matters wherein ye dispute.'"* I thought it was interesting that, according to this verse, the benefit of following Jesus came during this life rather than on Judgment Day.

The status of the Bible as having being divinely inspired was likewise not a source of controversy with my Muslim friends or the Holy Quran. Although I had originally been angered and frustrated by the Muslim contention that when early Christians had translated and preserved the Bible, they had changed the words and meanings whenever convenient, I had found examples of this in the footnotes and margin notes of my own NIV, some of which I have already shown, and others of which will be seen later in this manuscript.

I considered just abandoning all Christian texts, but I couldn't really blame the Bible for the way Christian scholars had interpreted it. My only question was whether things had become so obscured over the centuries that it would be impossible to decipher what the Prophets had originally meant. So far, I had been studying the Bible, reading, praying, rereading and searching for answers for almost a year. There was no question that what I had learned was different from what I had expected. However, the more I learned, the more I found that the message of the Bible was still strong and internally consistent. For that reason, I decided that I would continue to use the Bible in my exploration of Jesus' actual message. I was quite excited because it seemed that with the Spirit of Wisdom as "firstborn", strengthening, empowering and enlightening Jesus, the Bible had become more consistent rather than less, although with a different message than that which I had been taught by the Church.

After the divinity of Jesus, the other major area of doctrinal controversy between Christianity and Islam was the crucifixion. My Muslim friends simply did not believe that it was actually Jesus who had been crucified. Translations of the meaning of the Holy Quran that pertain to this include (from the Abdullah Yusuf Ali New Revised Edition) Surah 4: 157-159: *“That they said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah.’ But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them. And those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow. For of a surety, they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise – and there is none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death; and on the Day of Judgment He will be a witness against them”* and Surah 3: 54-55: *“And (the unbelievers) plotted and planned, and Allah too planned, and the best of planners is Allah. Behold! Allah said: ‘O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: Then shall ye all return unto me, and I will judge between you of the matters wherein ye dispute.’”*

When I read these verses, I wondered if both sides had been guilty of over-interpreting the Word of God. The Holy Quran said that the Jews had thought that they had crucified and killed Jesus but that instead, Jesus had been taken up to Heaven by God. The lesson that I saw was that the Jews had not crucified Jesus, nor had they killed him, and that God was in control of events that day. The Holy Quran said that everyone who differed about those events was full of doubts, with only conjecture to follow. I had to wonder if this verse from the Holy Quran shouldn't be read as a warning to anyone who argued about them. There are traditions in Islam that expand on these matters, but these are ascribed to the followers of Mohammed (PBUH) rather than to the Prophet himself.

That God was in control that day was confirmed by both the prophecies of Isaiah and the statements of Jesus. Isaiah 53:10 said **“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.”** Jesus confirmed this in Matthew 26:52-54: **“‘Put your sword back in its place,’ Jesus said to him, ‘for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?’”** and in John 19:11: **“Jesus answered, ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.’”**

Both the Bible and the Holy Quran were in agreement that what passed between God and Jesus on the hill of Golgotha was under God’s control. Jesus surrendered himself to God. God found Jesus acceptable and took him up to Heaven. I saw a strong parallel with Abraham’s obedience to God in his willingness to sacrifice his firstborn son. In that situation, it was the willingness and the offering, not the blood, that God required. It became apparent to me that the people who wished to argue about the mechanism of Jesus’ exaltation were really missing the point.

It is difficult to avoid the temptation to “fill in the gaps” when reading God’s word. In all of the books, there are points which are explicitly stated, but there are also questions that we may ask which are not answered, and our attempts to answer these questions can lead to disputes which may remain unresolvable to the end of time. There is an excellent verse in the Holy Quran about how to approach conflicts when interpreting the Word of God. Surah 3: 7 says: *“He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book; In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are not of well-established meaning. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is not of well-established meaning, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden*

*meanings, but no one knows its true meanings except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: 'We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord' and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.'*

Yusuf Ali in his commentary says: "This passage gives us an important clue to the interpretation of the Holy Quran. Broadly speaking it may be divided into two portions, not given separately, but intermingled.

1. The nucleus or foundation of the Book, literally "the mother of the Book".
2. The part which is not of well-established meaning. It is very fascinating to take up the latter, and exercise our ingenuity about its inner meaning. But it refers to such profound spiritual matters that human language is inadequate to it, and though people of wisdom may get some light from it, no one should be dogmatic, as the final meaning is known to Allah alone."

I believe that the whole of God's revealed Word is true and can only be fully understood with God's help. Those things that are important for us to understand are explicitly stated. It is a sign of perversity to seek discord and division rather than unity and understanding. When studying the Holy Quran and the Holy Bible, I found that if I read the words, seeking understanding and enlightenment, and avoided drawing conclusions that were not explicitly stated, that there was no conflict between them, even about the Crucifixion. The Quran taught that everyone had misinterpreted the events. Isaiah had said that the suffering servant would **"see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord would prosper in his hand."**

## Jesus' Promise

I was now left with absolutely no idea what the Bible said about how Jesus, his teaching and his being taken up by God affected me. I began to search for the meaning of Jesus' exaltation in the Gospels. My first surprise was in the Book of Matthew. I had always been taught that the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4 referred to Jesus' being the sacrifice for my sins. Matthew 8:17 said: **"This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.'"** Instead, in the context of the Gospel verses where I found it quoted, this verse actually referred to Jesus' healing ministry. This verse and Matthew 12:18-21 confirmed that Jesus was the servant referred to by Isaiah 42 and 53. Matthew 12:18-21 says: **"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."** I was struck by the realization that the servant was chosen by God and that the Prophecy said that Jesus would proclaim justice, not absolution and that he would lead justice, not mercy, to victory.

Later in Matthew, Jesus is quoted as saying: **"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."** in verse 26:28. As a Christian, when I had read this, I had understood that it referred to Jesus' blood pouring out to wash away our sins. Reading it now, it occurred to me that "poured out" in this verse could more properly grammatically apply to the covenant, as that is the noun which it modifies. According to the verse John 19:34: **"Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water"**, Jesus' blood wasn't poured out; it was only some water from his abdominal cavity, with blood mixed in it.

Lastly, Jesus' great commission at the end of the book of Matthew enjoined the disciples not to proclaim forgiveness in the name of Jesus, or by the blood or sacrifice of Jesus, but instead to proclaim Baptism, an act of repentance, and obedience to all of Jesus' teachings.

In the book of Mark, the only reference I found to simple belief leading to forgiveness occurs at the end of Chapter 16 verses 9-20. According to the footnotes in my New International Version, these verses were not present in the earliest manuscripts of Mark.

The book of Luke said in 24:46-47: **"The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and the forgiveness of sins (in some translations: the change of heart that brings about the forgiveness of sins) will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."** Instead of proclaiming absolution on the basis of belief and substitutional sacrifice, I thought that these verses could more appropriately be interpreted as teaching that repentance would precede forgiveness.

It was in the Gospel of John that Jesus had the most to say about his being taken up by God. In John 12:24, he said: **"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."** Though this verse certainly talked about the necessity of death in a general way, it said little about any specific outcome Jesus expected of his own. In John 12:32, Jesus said: **"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."** I thought that although this clearly showed that Jesus knew that he would eventually be taken up to Heaven, and that this would have a significant worldwide impact, it did not say what that impact would be. I also noticed that Jesus and the Gospels spoke more often about his suffering, going away and being taken up to Heaven than they did about him dying.

It was when I read John 14:3: **"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am"** that I finally found a specific reference by Jesus to what



he expected to do after being taken away. Neither it nor John 16:5-7: **“Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you”**, said anything about Jesus being a sacrifice to absolve either his disciples or the rest of us. In fact, in none of the Gospels did I find any reference to Jesus being a sacrifice for any of our sins.

Jesus taught repentance and obedience to the Law. John 15:9-10: **“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love”**, was quite explicit, as was John 8:29: **“The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”** Both verses said that even Jesus had to obey the commands of God to remain in his love.

In addition to examining the Gospels, I knew that there were many verses in the Old Testament which could be applied to Jesus and his ministry. Isaiah 49:6 said: **“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”** To me, this verse spoke of restoration for Israel through the servant, and guidance for the rest of the world.

Another long prophecy found in Isaiah 53 had always been presented to me to be one of “the” prophecies referring to Jesus, and so I reread it carefully: **“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our**

**infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

**“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.**

**“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”**

This was perhaps the most explicit prophecy regarding the suffering of the servant of God that I found in the Old Testament. It confirmed to me that the servant was not divine. It contained the seeds of resolution for the conflict between Muslims and Christians regarding the events at the crucifixion. Most importantly, this passage contained a lot of information about how I was to benefit from Jesus’ ministry. It did not say that the servant would receive my punishment.

I had always read the passage: **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the**

**iniquity of us all**" and understood that it said that everyone's punishment had been assigned to Jesus. Iniquity is not punishment. Its synonyms are sin, depravity, wickedness, darkness and corruption. Whatever else it meant, I realized that Isaiah 53 didn't say that any of us would be absolved of the responsibility for our own actions. Although it did say that all would benefit by his suffering, this chapter said that it would be **"by his knowledge"** that the righteous servant would **"justify many"**.

After the servant had suffered, Isaiah 53 declared that he would be the recipient of God's blessings. It said: **"After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors."** For the rest of us, Isaiah taught: **"he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors"**, but didn't say what that intercession was for. Instead of proclaiming a direct benefit for others from Jesus' obedience and submission to God, this prophecy from Isaiah said that Jesus was the one who would receive the portion and the spoils, and that other transgressors would be given knowledge and his intercession.

I needed to check this conclusion somehow, and so I examined **"and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering"** by looking in the Old Testament to find out what a guilt offering actually was. I had always assumed that this offering had been universal, for everyone, and had been the primary purpose of Jesus' ministry. Leviticus 5:14-18 was very specific: **"The Lord said to Moses: 'When a person commits a violation and sins unintentionally in regard to any of the Lord's holy things, he is to bring to the Lord as a penalty a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value in silver, according to the sanctuary shekel. It is a guilt offering. He must make restitution for what he has failed to do in regard to the holy things, add a fifth of the value to that and give it all to the priest, who will make atonement for**

him with the ram as a guilt offering, and he will be forgiven. If a person sins and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands, even though he does not know it, he is guilty and will be held responsible. He is to bring to the priest as a guilt offering a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him for the wrong he has committed unintentionally, and he will be forgiven." Moses in Leviticus said that a guilt offering only pertains to unintentional sin, particularly in regard to one of "**the Lord's holy things**", and that it was without universal connotations. It seemed most likely in that context that the "guilt offering" was for Jesus himself rather than the rest of the world.

Wherever I looked, neither Jesus nor the Old Testament said that his followers were supposed to hope for personal absolution as a consequence of Jesus' sacrifice. Instead, they promised knowledge and intercession. I now had one remaining question. I needed to find out if Jesus had said what his intercession would be for!

In fact, I found that Jesus had specifically stated that the result of his follower's Faith would be obedience. The intercession that Jesus said he would make was not for forgiveness but instead that his followers be given the Spirit of truth to give them guidance. Jesus made this promise to the disciples in John 14:15-17: "**If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.**" John 16:5-11 said: "**Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: In regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see**

**me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."**

I think that if Jesus had been planning to be a sacrifice of atonement for all his followers, he would have said so, or if the belief was some sort of a test, he probably would have said nothing explicit. Instead, Jesus said very plainly in the Gospels how his followers would benefit from following him. He said that if they loved him, they would obey his teachings, and that if they did, they would receive God's Grace. In John 5:28-29, it says: **"Do not be amazed by this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned"**, in John 8:31-32, Jesus said: **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"** and in John 14:23: **"Jesus answered, 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'"**

By this point in my search, I knew that I could no longer accept that any of the doctrines that I had been taught since I was a child were true. I had thought that if I ever rejected my doctrine, that I would lose my Faith. However, even in the absence of a framework for belief, I still believed. To me, that was a miracle. I had always believed that if I lost my certainty that Jesus as God had died for me personally, that I would have lost everything. Now, even though I had lost my doctrine, I still trusted God. I still trusted His power to teach me through His Word and Spirit. More than I ever had before, I trusted in the Justice and Mercy of his Judgment. Instead of the despondency and hopelessness that I had once felt, I was experiencing a steadily increasing feeling of excitement. The more I searched and read and researched, the more plain and obvious the words of the Bible became. Instead of needing to decode the meaning, I was finding the words of Jesus and the Old Testament Prophets to be incredibly explicit and easy to understand.

## The Epistles

I had become quite excited exploring the writings and recorded words of God's Prophets. My own reading and interpretation of the message of the Bible had changed greatly from what it had been, and yet what I had believed had been based on almost two thousand years of devout study by others. It seemed almost impossible that so many wise and learned scholars as there had been in the history of the Christian church could have been wrong! I wanted to discover where Christianity had begun to diverge from what I found to be the words of Christ for two reasons. First, I was curious. Second, I still needed to double-check my conclusions. If I could find further evidence of verse manipulation, I felt that it would confirm that I was not completely off in my own interpretation of the Bible so far. I was left with the epistles.

I had not done a systematic review of the rest of the books in the New Testament. I knew that it was important that I do so, since the writers of the epistles had believed that they were transmitting the Gospel of Jesus with the assistance of the Spirit of Truth. Although they had been written by apostles and followers, and therefore could not be given the same weight as the words of Jesus himself, I knew that the epistles still carried a wealth of information and advice. As well, they had been centrally important in the development of Christianity. I expected that much of what I read would support modern doctrine because of what I had been taught in the past. On the other hand, I had already learned to question so much of what I had believed that I was prepared for just about anything. Whatever else I thought, and whatever I found, I realized that it would be as inappropriate for me to avoid the work of Jesus' followers on the basis of what other people had said they had taught as it would have been had I never explored the rest of the Bible. After all, I had the books!

I began by reviewing the works and words of Peter, because Jesus had said that he would be the founder of Jesus' approved Church. Matthew 16:18 had said: **"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it."** Peter had always been one of my favourite apostles. In Church, my pastors and teachers had often focused on his flaws, including when he was rebuked by Jesus, or the night he rejected Jesus, when Peter had been afraid for his own life and freedom. To me, Peter had been the most human of Jesus' followers. Although he had faults, he also showed a powerful yearning to be more and better than he was. I found him easy to relate to.

I wasn't surprised to discover that Peter did not teach Jesus was God, nor did he contradict Jesus in any other way. In Acts 2:22, Peter was speaking to a crowd about Jesus when he said: **"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him"**, and in Acts 2:36, speaking to another group, he said: **"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."** In Acts 3:13, Peter is quoted as saying: **"The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus"**, and in 1 Peter 1:21, Peter wrote this about Jesus: **"Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God."** None of these verses supported the divinity of Jesus at all. What they all showed was that Peter was convinced that Jesus was a man, sent, led and exalted by God.

The letters by and about Peter also didn't say that Jesus was a sacrifice to absolve us from sin. He was quoted in Acts 2:38 as saying: **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"**, and in Acts 3:19: **"Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshment may come from the Lord."** Luke taught in Acts 3:26 that

Peter had said: “When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning you from your wicked ways,” and in 1 Peter 1:13-17, he wrote: **“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’ Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.”**

I had always been taught that Baptism was an act of obedience that resulted in the absolution of sin and that it in some fashion actually joined Christians to the Christ in sacrifice. Instead of learning that Peter supported this, I found 1 Peter 3:21: **“and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.”** This verse didn’t say that Baptism had some mystical effect of forgiveness by itself, only that baptism by water symbolized a pledge of obedience to God. In Acts 10:44-47, Luke recorded that: **“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’”** Baptism was described as an act of obedience, a pledge of good behaviour, and a sign of God’s Grace, but not as the source of forgiveness. The water baptism was subject to the gift of the Holy Spirit, not the other way around! Once again, these passages showed that there was no contradiction between the words of the Bible and the Quran in Surah 2: 138: **“(Our religion is) the Baptism of Allah: And who can baptize better than Allah? And it is He Whom we worship.”**

The image evoked by the words of the Holy Quran on the subject of Baptism was particularly meaningful to me. Having been raised as



a Lutheran, and then choosing to become a Baptist, I was quite sensitive to the controversy surrounding the practice. I had been taught that the sacrament of Baptism could be performed on a child without their volition, simply by sprinkling or washing them with blessed water. Later as a Baptist, I chose to have my Baptism repeated because I came to believe that I was commanded to actually immerse myself. In the Holy Quran, the Arabic word used (approximated in English) is “Sibghah”, the root meaning of which implies a dye or colour. So the beautiful image of Baptism expressed by the Holy Quran is not merely a washing, or even an immersion, but is instead a literal “soaking” in the Will of God, so that every fibre of one’s being becomes indelibly permeated.

Although Peter only confirmed Jesus’ own lessons, I expected that John’s would go quite a bit further towards modern Christianity. John had always been a bit of an enigma to me. The Bible implied that he was the most beloved of the apostles, but really said little about his character. I approached his writings with both interest and trepidation. I was pretty sure that if anyone was going to force me to reconsider my conclusions, it would be him. 1 John 5:20 taught: **“We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true – even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”** I had always thought this verse confirmed Jesus was the true God. Reading it now, I realized that “his” and “him” in this passage actually referred to God, not Jesus, and so the final “He” could have referred to either.

I had also believed that John taught that we were forgiven for our sins on the basis of our belief and acceptance of the substitutional sacrifice of Jesus, because of 1 John 1:7: **“And the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin”**, 1 John 5:12: **“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life”** and 1 John 5:13: **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”** But John was

the one who had said: **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”** in 1 John 1:9, and: **“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him’, but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him; Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did”** in 1 John 2:3-5.

When I started looking around, although I could find verses where John proclaimed that belief in Jesus brought about forgiveness and reconciliation with God, whenever he became more specific about the actual mechanism of salvation, he seemed to say that belief led to obedience, confession and repentance, and that these were the basis of God’s forgiveness. As well, although John did say repeatedly that Jesus was the Son of God, when I reviewed them, I saw that his writings showed he considered us all to be God’s children. 1 John 3:1-3 said: **“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And this is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”**

So, like I had done everywhere else, I continued slowly through everything that John had written, looking for verses about Jesus, sacrifice, forgiveness and salvation. In 1 John 3:7-10, when he wrote: **“Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the**

**devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother”,** it said nothing about forgiveness because of sacrifice or belief. Instead it was quite a specific declaration that Jesus’ purpose had been to bring obedience through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When I came to 1 John 3: 4-6, I read: **“Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.”** This verse had actually been quoted to me by my teachers as proof that Jesus was a sacrifice that had taken away the penalty for our sins. Since I had already learned from 1 John 2:5-6 that being “in Jesus” or “in God” referred to obedience, and not to spiritual possession, I realized that this verse said only that if you obeyed Jesus, you would stop sinning.

Understanding exactly what John had said in 1 John 2:5-6 and 3:4-6 also helped clarify a couple of other verses in the same book. 1 John 2:2 in my NIV said: **“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world”,** and 1 John 4:10 said: **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** In this form, both acted as strong supports for contemporary Christian doctrine. According to my NIV footnotes, however, another version of the verses that was not included in most translations reads: **“He is the one who turns aside God’s wrath, taking away our sins, and not only ours but also the sins of the whole world”** and **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away our sins.”** While by themselves these variations were not particularly different from the first, 1 John 3:4-6 said that the phrase, **“taking away our sins”** referred to Jesus’ teaching obedience, and not to any sort of absolution. Seen from this perspective, I had to conclude that they could be interpreted to only confirm Jesus’ own lessons about the result of belief in him and the validity of his

message. Finding out which of these versions were actually what had originally been written by John was not possible, since both were presented in different manuscripts, and the original was apparently not available or at least recognized as such.

It had been an interesting year. When I had investigated the Old Testament, looking for a way to show that the Messiah was a divine incarnation, I had been forced to accept that the Christ they prophesied was only a man, albeit a very blessed and special one. Then, when I had gone to the Gospels to find proof that Jesus had said that he was God, and that his death would redeem mankind, I had instead found that he said that he did God's will with God's help, and that anyone who believed he was sent by God would obey him. Now in John's letters, expecting to find the roots of modern Christianity, I saw that the difference between what I had expected and what he had actually written was pretty much the same as it had been everywhere else. Even John hadn't unequivocally supported modern Christianity.

In retrospect, I had to question whether it was John's intention to expand as much as he was interpreted to have on Jesus' own words. In fact, the epistles that he wrote carry a particularly dire warning about just this sort of practice. 2 John 1:7-11 says: **"Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."**

It seemed to me when I examined these verses that the phrase "teaching of Christ" could be taken in two ways. Either John meant that everyone should teach about Jesus and nothing else, or he meant that they should limit themselves to teaching only what Jesus taught.

In sermons to which I had listened, this verse was used to show that Christians must profess that Jesus was the sacrifice for all sins, and that repentance and obedience played a less significant role in God's forgiveness. Since John himself wrote about subjects other than Jesus, notably obedience and repentance, I now think it most likely that he meant to warn against listening to the words of those who added to the message that Jesus himself had delivered.

## Saint Paul

Lastly, I reread all of the books ascribed to Paul the Apostle. According to my *Oxford Companion*, Paul has been called “the second founder of Christianity” and it's true that he wrote the majority of the books found in the New Testament. What I had been taught about him and his work was quite varied. When I had been growing up as a Lutheran, he had generally been portrayed as a bit of an authoritarian. Later, in the Baptist Church, he had been acclaimed as a great liberator, proclaiming freedom for Christians from bondage to the Law. I wasn't sure what to expect. I had always believed that Paul taught that Jesus was God, because he said in Philippians 2:6: **“Who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”**, and in Colossians 1:15-16: **“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth.”** But Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 11:7 that **“a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God.”**

When I actually sat down and read everything Paul had written, I realized that figuring out what he had originally meant to say was going to be difficult. Paul was a Pharisee and had trained under some of the greatest teachers of his time. The language and phraseology that he used frequently seemed confusing to me, perhaps because he

assumed that those of us who read it would be more familiar with the context of his words and the intellectual climate in which he lived than we are today. For instance, the Wisdom books of the Apocrypha were written around the time that Paul lived, and he was no doubt more familiar with their content than most modern day Christians. As I have already shown, these works and the book of Proverbs identified the Spirit of Wisdom as the firstborn of God's creations, an image of God, and as an active participant in the rest of God's Creation. If Paul said that Jesus was the firstborn through whom all else had been created, and Jewish theology at that time identified the Spirit of Wisdom in the same way, then it seemed to me that Paul likely meant that he believed Jesus to be the incarnation of the Spirit of Wisdom. Certainly, the modern Christian interpretation seemed less likely to me in the context of everything else that I had read. Likewise, if Paul said that man is the image and glory of God, and that Jesus was the image of God, these verses could not be interpreted to mean that Paul thought that Jesus was divine. When I was a Christian, I had always been sure that I understood what Paul had meant. Now, having read everything that I had, I realized that I probably hadn't understood him at all.

My teachers and pastors had always said that Philippians 2:6 proved Paul had believed that somehow Jesus had been God in Heaven, and then willingly had become a man on earth. I had always tended to avoid thinking about this verse too much because this interpretation had never really made sense to me. No one had ever been able to explain to me how God could choose not to grasp at equality with Himself! Now I realized that in the Old Testament creation stories from which Paul had worked, the people who had grasped at equality with God had been Adam and Eve. According to Genesis, they had eaten from the forbidden fruit in order to gain knowledge of good and evil and so become more like God. Now looking at what Paul had written to the Philippians, it seemed to me that he was only saying that before the Spirit of Wisdom left God's

presence and came among men, it had not committed the same sin as Adam and Eve had. Instead of being expelled from paradise, the Spirit of Wisdom had come willingly.

Another of the verses that had been written by Paul, Romans 9:5 said: **“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!”** When I first read this, it appeared to me that Paul had been convinced that Jesus was God. Since Paul, by his own report, had been given a personal revelation and had spoken to some people who had personally known Jesus, this confused me. However, my NIV Bible’s margin notes relating to this particular verse stated that there were three versions available in the translation of early documents: **“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!”** (the version found in later translations), **“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is over all, God be forever praised!”** and **“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, God who is over all be forever praised!”** (a version that no Muslim would argue with).

You can see how the different word orders and punctuation resulted in serious variations in meaning. I tried to find out, but could not discover, how the version used in the current translated text of the Bible was chosen over the others. Unfortunately, my NIV footnotes and my *Oxford Companion* shed no light on this question. In speaking to some experts in this area, I have since learned that commonly, contentious translations like this one are put to a sort of vote where the total number of versions available are tabulated, and then the frequency of each in the earliest documents available is evaluated. Experts confer, and the most common early version is then generally perpetuated. The problem I see with this sort of enumeration is that one is necessarily influenced by the bias of the people who were either the most prolific in recording their own preferred verse, or else most skilled in its preservation. The truth is

that Paul taught only one of the versions, and this was likely the one most consistent with his other work. It is possible, and maybe even probable, that the early writers and editors of the Bible, who compiled it hundreds of years after Paul died, simply chose the version of the verse that supported existing doctrine, and that this has been reproduced ever since.

Paul frequently referred to Jesus as a sacrifice, but he was quite unclear about how he felt that this sacrifice brought about our absolution. What he did say in Acts 13:38 was: **“Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed”**, and in Romans 2:6-8 and 16: **“God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger”** and **“This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my Gospel declares.”** The Bible said that in Romans 3:25, Paul had written: **“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”** If these were all his words, then it seemed to me that Paul had contradicted himself. However, my NIV said that another available version of this verse says: **“God presented him as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin, through faith in his blood.”** I already knew from John that taking away sin and taking away punishment were two different things.

On the one hand, I found as I studied that Paul repeatedly said that Christ died for sinners, and that all were “justified” by his blood. On the other hand, Paul repeatedly taught that everyone would be judged on the basis of his or her (own) behaviour, obedience and faith. Reading through Romans, it even seemed to say that Paul somehow felt that sin was created by God’s Law. I actually began to wonder if Paul had purposely set out to confuse those he taught. I wondered if he had decided that he couldn’t destroy the early Christians by killing them, and that he should destroy their faith instead by teaching false doctrines, argued



skilfully enough to confuse even the best of Jesus' followers.

In Ephesians 1:13-14 and Romans 8: 9-17, I finally found verses that indicated Paul taught just as Jesus had. I discovered that although his phraseology was very different from the other writers of the New Testament, his meaning had probably been the same. Salvation came to Jesus' followers through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He said Ephesians 1:13-14: **"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory"** and in Romans 8: 9-17, **"You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his suffering in order that we may also share in his glory."**

It was pretty obvious reading this that among other things, Paul had a very different idea of what "Son of God" meant than what my evangelical teachers had understood him to mean. In 2 Corinthians 6:17, Paul took a selection of verses and phrases and joined them together as if they were all one, and I think that this conglomeration

explains best his own understanding of the “Fatherhood of God”. **“Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”**

On one of his trips to Jerusalem, Paul was confronted by the Jewish Christians about his obedience to the law. He was told by the leaders in Acts 21:24-25: **“Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.”**

Paul, who is revered in Christianity as the man who taught that the Law no longer had any power over the followers of Jesus, is recorded in Acts 21:26 to have done the following: **“The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.”** So for all that he apparently wrote about the end of Law and obedience through the Law, Paul didn’t actually practice what I had always thought that he had preached.

Before being sent to Rome, Paul was questioned by Agrippa. In Acts 26:15-23, Luke records that he said regarding his ministry: **“Then I asked, ‘Who are you Lord?’ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’ So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those**

**in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."**

Paul was more easily misunderstood than Peter and John. Despite this, I don't think that Paul actually intended in his own letters and lessons to go beyond what Jesus had taught. Paul did not say that Jesus was God, nor did he teach that forgiveness came as a result of belief. The only significant departure I think I found was that he tended to ascribe God's gift of the Holy Spirit to Jesus, even though Jesus had said that God chose to send it to those who obeyed him. It turned out that the problem that I had understanding Paul's epistles had been identified by Peter in 2 Peter 3:16 when about Paul, he wrote: **"He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other scriptures, to their own destruction."** It was comforting to realize that I had not been the first to experience some confusion when trying to understand what Paul had actually meant. I thought it was unfortunate that this verse had never been the subject of a sermon in any church that I had attended, as it may have caused some of us to be a little less emphatic in our interpretations of his work.

## Why I Am a Muslim

**I** read the Bible to find convincing evidence to confirm Christian doctrine so that I could teach Muslims that they should become

Christians. Instead, I found that the Bible does not independently support a doctrine that claims that Jesus is God, in trinity or otherwise. As well, I did not find support from Jesus or in the Old Testament for the doctrine that Jesus died to take the penalty of our sins onto himself so that we could be forgiven by God. Even the New Testament writers whose words could be construed in that way became less clear with scrutiny. The Bible didn't say that God requires sacrifice. In fact, it said: **"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings"** in Hosea 6:6, and: **"Sacrifice and burnt offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced (or opened), burnt offering and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come – it is written about me in the scroll'"** in Psalm 40:6-7. It seems inconsistent to me now that Christianity should teach that God is eternal and omnipotent, and yet claim that "He" cannot forgive sin without sacrificial bloodshed.

What the Bible taught me was that Jesus was sent by God and born of a virgin by the power of God to be the Messiah described in the Old Testament. He is identified as the "Word of God" in both the Bible and the Quran. I believe that the Spirit which came to him was the Spirit of Wisdom, and that this Spirit is the one which has always been with the Prophets of God. This Spirit is spoken of as being distinct from God and His angels in both the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran. I believe that Jesus had a special relationship with the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by his miraculous acts (for which he generally denied credit) and I think John, Peter and Paul thought so too, but I do not pretend to understand what that relationship was. I also don't think that this belief of mine is important, because Jesus himself did not say much about it. The rest of the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran say only that he was supported by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus taught faith in God, repentance and obedience. For his obedient followers, he promised to intercede with God that they might receive the help of the Holy Spirit. I think that this is also the Spirit of Wisdom. It is important to remember that according to the

Gospels, God is the One who decides who will receive this gift, not Jesus. Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, and he went willingly to this fate, submitting himself to God. Instead, God lifted him up to be with Him. When he returns, Jesus will take his righteous followers to be with him in Heaven. Everything that happened to Jesus was with God's permission.

When I still believed that the Bible taught that Jesus was God Incarnate, I had always had trouble understanding Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus asked God to spare him from the next day's arrest, trial, torture and condemnation, saying: **"Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."** in Mark 14:36. If Jesus had really been hinting throughout his time on earth that he was divine, then I sometimes wondered why he made a distinction between his will and God's. My non-Christian friends also questioned whether Jesus' suffering was really all that significant, since as God he would have known the severity, duration and outcome, and likely would have been able to call upon greater than human resources of strength and perseverance.

When I finally accepted Jesus' humanity, I saw an eloquent illustration of the Glory, Power and Goodness of God: That Jesus, though only a man, was able with the help of the Spirit to fulfill the Law (sufficiently in God's Justice and Mercy), and was exalted and raised by God to Heaven as promised. When in the past, I had feared God's Judgment, I was comforted by the assurance that His son had taken my punishment onto himself. Now I instead remember that Jesus taught that we all belong to God, and that included among the infinite perspectives from which God considers each of us is the love that a Father has for their beloved child.

Because I had these beliefs, I was unable to remain a Christian, even though I am convinced that I believe what the Bible was meant to teach. I think the most important thing that I learned is that Faith and doctrine are not the same. Faith is not the ability to believe, nor is

belief proof of Faith. Faith is obedience and submission to God. Faith is trust. This trust is God's gift to each of us. Every individual reported to have had Faith, in either the Bible or the Quran, regardless of his or her belief, willingly chose to submit to and obey the commands of God. Those reported to have rebelled against God did not rebel by their beliefs. They rebelled by their actions.

I had been warned to avoid the Quran, because it would destroy my Faith. Instead, when I read the Quran, I found myself learning what Faith really was. As well, I found my confidence in the validity of the actual teachings of the Bible confirmed. It was this Gift of Faith that made me Muslim. When I asked for Wisdom, I was given Faith in God, rather than faith in my own doctrines.

I had always been taught that the two Books – the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran – were in opposition. I found that this was not the case. Even regarding Jesus, the Quran supported everything that the Bible actually said. I think that the fact that each of the two books confirms the other is one of the greatest signs of their truth, that despite over a thousand years of political manoeuvring, secular forces have been unable to substantially change the actual words, even though they have been able to change their interpretation. The Quran makes it very plain that fruitless religious arguments between Jews, Christians and Muslims are to be avoided. Surah 29: 46 says: *“And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury); but say, ‘We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is One; and it is to him we bow (in Islam).’”* Vain disputation is forbidden in both the Bible and the Quran. I believe that the Books speak for themselves.

Far from opposing Jesus, Muslims even look forward to the “second coming” when we will join with Jesus in prayer and in opposing Satan. The sayings of Mohammed (PBUH) which are not directly quoted from the Quran are collected in the hadiths. One of

these from *Kitab Al-Fitan Wa Ashrat as Sa'ah* Chapter MCXCVIII says:

“Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: ‘The Last Hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-Amaq or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina to counteract them. When they will arrange themselves in ranks, the Romans would say: ‘Do not stand between us and those Muslims who took prisoners from amongst us. Let us fight with them’; and the Muslims would say: ‘Nay, by Allah, we would never get aside from you and from our brethren that you may fight them.’ Then will they fight and a third part of the army would run away, whom Allah will never forgive. A third part of the army, which would be constituted of excellent martyrs in Allah’s eye, would be killed, and the third who would never be put to trial would win, and they would be conquerors of Constantinople. And as they would be busy in distributing the spoils of war amongst themselves after hanging their swords in olive trees, Satan would cry: ‘The Dajjal has taken your place among your family.’ They would then come out, but it would be of no avail. And when they would come to Syria, he would come out while they would be still preparing themselves for battle, drawing up the ranks. Certainly the time of prayer shall come, and then Jesus (PBUH) the son of Mary would descend and would lead them in prayer. When the enemy of Allah would see him, it would disappear just as salt dissolves itself in water, and if Jesus were not to confront them at all, even then it would dissolve completely, but Allah would kill them by his hand, and he would show them their blood on his lance (the lance of Jesus Christ).”

To be a follower of Jesus or Mohammed or Moses or any other of the many Prophets of the One God, we must live in service to the Will of God. Moses said: **"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might."** A Pharisee named Hillel, about a hundred years before Christ, was asked by a centurion to summarize the Laws of Judaism while standing on one foot. Perched on one leg, he said: **"Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. Do not do unto others what you would not have done unto you... The rest is only commentary."** Later, Jesus said: **"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One: you shall love the Lord your God with all your Heart, and with all your Soul and with all your Mind, and with all your might, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself."** The Holy Quran, in Surah 2: 177, teaches: *"It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; To spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer; and practice regular charity, to fulfill the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient in pain and adversity and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing."*

The message has always been the same. All of God's Prophets have taught faith, submission, obedience, kindness, charity, equality and fair dealing. Therefore I pray, fast and make my offerings as a Muslim now because I am sure that following Islam is a path that pleases God and because I can no longer believe this of Christianity. Although I was forced by my studies to give up many of the beliefs that I once had, what I am left with is a certainty that whatever God wants will be done in my life and my life to come. I have some difficulty conceiving why I would ever have wanted anything else.

I think the one thing that first attracted me to Islam was its simplicity. The word "Islam" means "submission". There are to me



three principles from which the rest of Islam is derived. The first and most important is that there is only One God, who named Himself “**I am, that I am**” to Moses, who is called “**Allah**”, “**The Lord**” in Arabic and simply “**God**” in English. God is the only uncreated “**One**” and requires nothing to continue unchanged and perfect for all eternity. Surah 2: 255 says: “*Allah! There is no god but He – the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there who can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knows what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they encompass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them, for He is The Most High, the Supreme (in glory).*”

The second principle is that God has chosen to reveal his messages to us through exalted Prophets, some known to us and some not, but all of whom have brought the same core message, varying only because the recipients were different peoples. Surah 10: 47 says: “*To every people (was sent) a Messenger: when their Messenger comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice and they will not be wronged*” and Surah 23: 51-52 says “*O ye messengers! Enjoy (all) things good and pure, and work righteousness, for I am well-acquainted with (all) that ye do. And verily this Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood, and I am your Lord and Cherisher; therefore Fear Me (and no other).*” Surah 4: 150-152 is a strong warning that we should avoid the temptation of Christians, and some Muslims, to exalt any one messenger over the rest: “*Those who deny Allah and His Messengers, and (those who) wish to separate Allah from His Messengers, saying: ‘We believe in some but reject others’, and (those who) wish to take a course midway – they are in truth (equally) unbelievers; and We have prepared for unbelievers a humiliating punishment. To those who believe in Allah and His Messengers and make no distinction*

*between any of His messengers, We shall soon give their (due) rewards; for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."*

Another principle is that God does not elevate any of the rest of us, Muslim or otherwise, above another and judges us all by the same standard; our submission to "Him". *"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things)."* Surah 49: 13.

I call myself a Muslim, knowing that to be a Muslim means being one of God's willing servants and one of a community of believers who follow the teachings of Islam. To me, Surah 2: 62: *"Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve"* is a reminder that just calling myself a Muslim is not enough. In the end, I will be judged on the basis of my faith and actions and mercifully punished or rewarded by God, who is Most Just and who always knows everything.

The declaration, spoken in Arabic, that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed (PBUH) is his Messenger, joins all Muslims in one Faith. The five daily prayers keep us from evil and help us remain in obedience to God. Although each prayer takes less than five minutes, it is difficult to contemplate doing something one knows to be wrong if one knows he or she will be praying to God, who knows everything, in the next couple of hours! Fasting during the month of Ramadan teaches self-control. Charity, given in love and respect by those who have more than they need, to those who have less, is a good act that benefits the giver through purification and the recipient by providing for their sustenance. And lastly, the pilgrimage to Mecca, enjoined upon those who can make the journey,

is an act of service and praise to God that benefits those who can make it, both in this life as an opportunity to participate in Worship within the larger Muslim community, and in the next life, since praise and service are good acts, pleasing to God.

Unfortunately, religion and politics have become linked to the extent that many people think of Muslims only in political terms. Because of this, some people choose to criticize Islam because of the laws and governance of some Muslim nations. It should not be surprising that the practices which receive their greatest attention and condemnation are not necessarily supported by the Holy Quran. The obsession that some Muslims have with their own fine points of doctrine, resulting in schisms and even bloodshed within Islam, is condemned. Surah 6: 159 says: *“As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least. Their affair is with Allah; He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did.”*

Likewise, the temptation to legislate religion is something that I think should be avoided. People must choose freely whether or not to revert to Islam. According to Surah 2: 256: *“Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks.”* There are some issues upon which not all Muslims agree. When we are deciding how to act, dress, eat and live, we are expected to do our utmost to obey God, the Prophets and the Word. Sometimes this calls for interpretation. Issues of importance are absolutely clear in the Quran. Laws forcing the unwilling to participate in religious observances that may or may not be founded in God’s Word should be avoided. On the other hand, if people choose amongst themselves to live by certain rules and practices that do not harm themselves or others, it really is not appropriate for the rest of the world to stand in judgment over them.

Many non-Muslims look at Islam today and ask how it is possible to profess to be a member of a religious group in whose name so

much evil is apparently done in the world. As I read the Quran and talk with fellow Muslims, it is obvious that there is no place for terrorism in Islam. Jihad cannot be declared against non-combatants. People who commit murder and rape, or those who use their own interpretations of Islam to oppress and subjugate others, cannot be practicing Islam, whatever they may claim, because these are simply not the actions of a servant of God.

This does not mean that I automatically disown any of my brothers or sisters who stand accused of heinous acts. Before you can judge another person by their actions, you must have a lot more information than second-hand accounts of what they did. One man's or government's "terrorist" may well be a man or woman fighting for his or her family, life, and dignity against insuperable odds with whatever means they find at hand. It is very easy for our own interpretation of events to be manipulated by those who control the information that we receive. News reports are always controlled by reporters, their sources, their editors and the context in which they live and work.

Finally, if it is correct and proper to judge a religion by its followers, we then must condemn every religion in the history of humanity. Every follower rebels against what they are taught and falls short of perfection, whatever their faith. One need only look at the remote and recent history of the Christian Church to find evidence of rebellion in the worshippers of Jesus. The recent Christian Serbian genocidal campaign against Bosnian Muslims stands as an excellent example. When I was a Christian, I did not feel that I had to question my own beliefs simply because some serial rapist declared himself to have been a born-again Baptist. If you judge a religion, you should judge it by its sources, not by those who claim to follow it.

We are all striving to please God. We need to make room for each other. I believe we can help achieve this by honest dialogue. A Muslim friend was recently confronted by a well-meaning Christian

on the campus of our university who said: “I’m just so worried about you because I don’t want you to go to hell!” She obviously didn’t realize that the woman she so addressed returned her concern! We have one God but many different doctrines. I have now come to question whether by themselves, our beliefs and doctrines matter as much as we all seem to think that they do. If Faith is really a gift from God, then we are all joined in that Faith by God. Although we are separated from each other by our doctrines, I wonder if perhaps it is our preoccupation with providing explanations for God’s goodness, or at least with believing that only we have the “correct” ones, that’s wrong.

## Why Islam?

My best friend is a Daoist, and he says that I “embody the Dao”, whatever that means! I have another friend who is an Orthodox Jew, who says that where I stand before God is valid to him, because in his Judaism, everyone has a place. A dear mentor, himself a Muslim and Sufi, explains conflict between religions by describing all humankind in a circle with God above us. In the center of the circle, we find our perfect relationship to our Lord and Creator. We are all drawn inevitably to move towards this center, because that is our created nature. As we look around the circle, we see some who seem to be headed in almost the same direction as ourselves, and some who are not. Some seem diametrically opposed to us from our own limited perspective. As we move closer to the place where God wants us to be, we cannot help but come closer to everyone else, even though our perspective may never change. It is only with the help of God that any of us can ever see the truth. I know that this perfect relationship is Islam, because of Surah 3: 19-20: *“The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will); nor did the People of*

*the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account. So if they dispute with thee, say: 'I have submitted my whole self to Allah, and so have those who follow me.' And say to the People of the Book and to those who are unlearned: 'Do ye (also) submit yourselves?' If they do, they are in right guidance, but if they turn back, thy duty is to convey the Message; and in Allah's sight are (all) His servants."*

Sometimes people I talk to wonder why, given my disillusionment with Christian doctrine and its deviation from its Prophetic roots, I didn't just reject all religions and become some sort of New Age guru! I answer them that I follow Islam because I know it is best. Some Muslims I know wonder whether I go far enough in condemning other religions in my writing and speaking. They think that instead of "best", I should say "only"! I often wish it was that simple. In fact, I am prevented from such a statement by verses like the one I just quoted, and by others like Surah 6: 108, which says in translation: "*Reville not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have we made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and We shall then tell them the truth of all that they did.*" It is wrong to condemn someone else's path to a right relationship with our God. If they do submit, they are on right guidance, and we must trust that they will eventually come to Islam. If they do not and are truly ignorant, then they may be driven to the sin of reviling the One God Who is Real. I can only explain why I say Islam is "best" and trust God that this is sufficient. I prefer that approach. When I think about the circle of humanity described by my Sufi friend, I think that someone standing in perfect Islam would see all the rest of us moving towards them, and could give valid and helpful guidance to anyone, regardless of where they started out, to help bring them to what we all seek.

I've described my childhood's simple Faith in God. I still feel in my heart that that kind of Faith is the best. It's accessible to everyone, regardless of education, experience and intelligence. I didn't understand it back then, and I could not even begin to explain it to myself or anyone else, but I knew that I had been made by God, that God knew me, and that we had a relationship that would go on forever. As I grew, my expanding ability to describe that relationship and my attempts to categorize it didn't improve it at all. I tried very hard to conform to the religious framework of the people around me because I wanted to fit in with them, not because it made me feel closer to my Creator. Then I read the Holy Quran and recognized my own God in the Words.

I will always be distrustful of modern, organized religions, with their well organized beliefs. They come too neatly packaged for my liking, and I think that they serve the tendency that we all share to stress what we believe much more than what we do, even though God's Prophets seem to me to recommend the opposite. Any large group of believers can't help but try to organize themselves by those beliefs, and they inevitably develop inclusion and exclusion criteria to keep some people in and to keep others out. It is difficult to leave room for honest uncertainty. To me, Faith is not about being right. Faith is the trust in God and God's Rightness that impels me to act in the way that I am supposed to act. When I meet others who share the same goal, to act in a way pleasing to our Creator, I know that I am among my brothers and sisters, regardless of their beliefs.

Faith comes from God. It's all we have when we're born without even the capacity for decision or action, and it's all we have when we die. We all respond to it differently, but in each of us, it drives us to draw closer to God, and in doing so, drives us to come closer to each other as well. Conversely, our explanations and beliefs (that become our religions and doctrines) often serve to drive us apart. That has to be wrong. God did not make some of us to be of less worth or to go astray, regardless of the positions and roles that we hold in relation to

each other in this life. The greatest evil of any religion lies in its ability to make us treat God or one another with disrespect.

That said, I think that some sort of framework of belief is both necessary and inevitable. It is also inevitable that we group ourselves according to those beliefs, and that we then teach them to our children. Although I agree that we all have an inborn sense of our relationship with God, of the difference between right and wrong, and of the importance of choosing one over the other, I do not agree that the yearning we all feel to know our God is both the beginning and the end of religion. I don't think that it's possible to live without structured beliefs because I don't think God made us that way. When we worship God, we are responding to a need to have a relationship with our Creator. We also share a need for spiritual companions of our own kind with whom we can talk about our need to understand things like why and how we were created, and what it was that we were made for. Our religious doctrines help fulfill those yearnings. It's our creativity with them that gets us into trouble sometimes.

Most often when I ask people why they have the beliefs that they do, they explain that it's convenient or culturally appropriate. Some people say that they are what they are because their parents brought them up that way, while others seem to get a lot of status, money or power by following the path that they are on. Unfortunately, one can't follow the news these days without realizing that a religion may also give us permission to treat certain other people in a derogatory fashion, or even give us permission to subjugate them to our will, and still feel somehow morally superior for doing so. I think that the only valid reason to choose any doctrine lies in its ability to aid us in choosing to act as God wants us to.

When I said that some Muslims think I should say that Islam is the only religion, I wrote that I wished it was that simple. In fact, it is! Islam teaches that every people has known a Prophet who taught about God, even though the names are all different. The Holy Quran commands that we follow these Messengers without distinction, in



Surah 4: 150-152: *“Those who deny Allah and His Messengers, and (those who) wish to separate Allah from His messengers, saying: ‘We believe in some but reject others’, and (those who) wish to take a course midway – They are in truth (equally) unbelievers, and We have prepared for unbelievers a humiliating punishment. To those who believe in Allah and His Messengers and make no distinction between any of the messengers, we shall soon give their (due) rewards, for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”* When you look into it, it’s really amazing how virtually every religion seems to have a core of monotheism to it! I think that every one of them started out in the same way, with one of God’s Prophets revealing Islam to their people.

Even if I think their beginnings were the same, I can’t say that even those religions that began with a Prophet revealing to his people the best way to please the One God are equally valid today. Identifying and acknowledging God’s many Prophets and Messengers in Islam is one thing, but following all but the last of them today is completely impossible because of the uncertainty that surrounds much of their teachings, as a consequence of variations and differences that have crept in over time. Some of these differences exist because of the different needs of the cultures to which the Prophets were sent. For example, having been slaves, the sons and daughters of Israel did not need to be told that slaves are as valued by God as their masters, or that freeing a slave is a good thing. Jesus came to remind a people becoming mired in legalism and mysticism that it is God’s Grace, not strict observance of the law and sacrifice, that brings about forgiveness and reconciliation, and to demonstrate that forgiveness and reconciliation in his own life. The Holy Quran dedicates a significant portion of Itself to the defence and protection of women, and the declaration that before God, men and women are equal.

Unfortunately, some of the differences found between the various doctrines are significant and have occurred inevitably with the passage of time. God does not teach us everything that there is to

know. We all try to explain things we don't understand. Over time, in the past in many religions, the core information has been lost or degraded, our own explanations have been expanded, and the emphasis has shifted away from where it should be. A more dire reason for some of the differences is the tendency we share to use positions of religious authority for our own benefit. Anyone can subvert their religion to manipulate the behaviour of their followers by inserting their own message. If this insertion is successful, it is propagated. Inevitably, even if they began with Divine Revelation, these old religions were subject to modification, decay and misinterpretation. Otherwise, we wouldn't have so many different ones! Today, choosing between these doctrines, or choosing to leave one that has become false, can be difficult. When we are young we aren't responsible (for choosing), because we don't even realize that we have a choice. Even when we get older and more experienced, I don't think many people feel drawn to change for a number of reasons. However, if you can, I think it is very important to make your own choice, and to choose wisely.

Intellectually, I have chosen Islam because, as I said, I know that it is the best. Its Prophet, Mohammed (PBUH), was divinely supported and inspired. The religion that he taught remains strong and vital, further evidence of that support and succour. The Book of Islam, the Holy Quran, contains many miraculous truths and insights on many diverse subjects including cosmology, embryology, physics, history and the location of Noah's (PBUH) Ark. Both the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and the Holy Quran fit well into the Prophetic tradition of the Middle-Eastern Semitic peoples. Mohammed (PBUH) is the last of the Prophets, and the Holy Quran the last of the Holy Books because it has descended seamlessly and quickly from revelation to print, in a people with an oral tradition strong enough to prevent mistake or modification. It has been safe from manipulation or decay ever since. Islam, when based solely on the Holy Quran, unchanged from when it was first revealed, and guided by the

practices and associated teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), is the only religion that I can be sure is the way God intended, and so Islam is the filter by which I choose to judge other doctrines and to live. I follow Islam because it helps me make good choices, and to treat God and Creation the way I'm supposed to.

Emotionally, I chose Islam because of the gentle way it accepted me. If one is born and raised a Muslim, Islam is complete in itself. I came to Islam with a long history of worship, prayer and meditation in a religion that I thought I understood. That religion is still a part of me, and it always will be. I thank God that in Islam I better understand who Jesus was and can better comprehend his role as Messiah. I smile when I meet evangelical Christians who tell me they want to bring me "back to Christ" because in truth, in Islam I never left him. I became Muslim, and this book was written, because of my realization that Christianity no longer followed the Christ. Islam completed my religion; it didn't erase it. From my own experience, I know that Islam is the eventual destination of anyone honestly seeking to find peace with God.

Finally, spiritually, I accepted Islam because when I read the Holy Quran, I felt as if I was coming home. Coming to Islam was a return to the simple Faith of my childhood. It calls us to trust and obey, and to accept ourselves the way that God made us. It teaches us again and again that God knows us in the same way. We don't need to be perfect, because God Is! We just have to do our honest best, trust God to make us better, and realize that God knows the truth about everything that we do. Surah 4: 31 teaches: *"If ye (but) eschew the most heinous of the things which ye are forbidden to do, We shall expel out of you all the evil in you, and admit you to a Gate of great honour."* Surah 39: 53-55 commands us: *"Say: 'O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah, for Allah forgives all sins, for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Turn ye to your Lord (in repentance) and bow to His (Will), before the Penalty comes on you: After that ye shall not be helped."*

*And follow the best of (the courses) revealed to you from your Lord, before the Penalty comes on you – of a sudden, while ye perceive not!”* Islam is simple surrender to the Will of God. I was told once not to read the Holy Quran because it was a dangerous book. I learned by my own experience that the Holy Quran is the most dangerous book in existence. No one can read it and experience the simple Truth and submission to God that it conveys without having his or her life changed. It is the Word of God. That is the reason that although I will always choose Faith over doctrine, I still choose to follow Islam.

In the same way that a good tool makes our work easier and better, a good religion makes it easier to act well. A bad tool just doesn't do the job. We all serve God. Some of us do so well and willingly, others either poorly or without understanding. Willing service will always be rewarded. In the universe that God created, everything contributes to God's plan. Even the rebellions and thoughtless acts that we and others commit, though they result in pain and suffering that should not have occurred, are incapable of making creation deviate from the end that God has intended since the beginning. God knew what we would do before the beginning. There is a Best Path that leads us directly from where we are to where God wants us to be. The first surah says: *“In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.”* Islam is the Straight Path. The words and meaning of the Holy Quran give the best guidance. Surah 6: 153 teaches: *“Verily this is My Way, leading straight. Follow it; follow not (other) paths; they will scatter you about from His (great) Path; thus doth He command you, that ye may be righteous.”*

## End Notes

To some extent, I have written this book hoping that it will be of some benefit to every student of Faith. Christian interpretation and re-interpretation over the centuries has rendered the Bible quite suspect to many. This is unfortunate, since there is guidance in the words of all of the Prophets, and Muslims are commanded to make no distinctions between them. I believe that the title “Son of God” in its linkage to the “Messiah” refers to a specific relationship described in the Old Testament between a man and his God. It implies neither a biological function for the Creator, nor a divine origin for Jesus. I had been afraid to read the Quran because I had been taught to expect blasphemy. I don’t think that sincere servants and searchers for truth should feel they must avoid the Bible, particularly in these modern times when there is an honest attempt being made, in the translation and interpretation of newly discovered writings, to return to the originally intended lessons.

When I first began to study Islam, to find flaws that I could use to win its followers to my own beliefs, I was surprised by how many of the Muslims I knew had actually read the Bible. None of them were surprised or shocked by what they had read, and all expressed confusion as to how Christianity had developed. I haven’t really addressed that question, but I think my own ideas are quite obvious. We must all be diligent in believing and following God’s Word as it is written, not as others interpret it. In the past, and even now in less literate countries, it is easy for those who are able to read God’s Word to control the actions of those who cannot, by manipulating their beliefs. Even among the literate, it is easy to give control of one’s faith and actions to a charismatic leader, but it is not correct to do so. It is especially wrong to ascribe to a creed because everyone else does, when so many of us have the tools to examine what the Prophets actually taught. If one follows the herd, one can practice the

cultural and political aspects of a religion in isolation, and forget that there is something very real, over and above everything else.

Primarily, I have written this for Christians who are now as I was, honestly striving to follow Jesus and worship God but who are instead foundering in a morass made up of two thousand years of accumulated scholarly manipulation of God's word. As I said at the beginning of this book, it is very tempting to choose to belong to a religion that promises to predict, moderate or control God's Judgment. I honestly believed that God had given me those gifts. I had little difficulty finding verses in the Bible to support my belief. It was only when I read the Bible as a whole, focusing on what Jesus, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other Prophets had actually said that I began to question whether my belief was correct. I found that I had been forcing the Words into the meanings that I wanted, rather than reading them for the lessons that were actually there. I wanted to believe that Christian doctrine correctly represented the Bible, because I believed it gave me assurances of peace with God. When I became Muslim, I accepted that my Faith and beliefs must follow what God has actually revealed if I truly want to serve "Him". Jesus commanded us to accept him and his lessons as a little child would. Children don't examine the words of their teachers for hidden meanings. They accept what they are told by the people they trust, as the literal truth.

1 John 5:1 teaches: **"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God."** I don't think that any Muslim I know would question whether Jesus is the Christ, because this is declared in the Holy Quran! When I am invited to discuss my beliefs with Christian leaders, I generally have to explain that our recognition of Jesus' "Messiah-hood" and our anticipation of his second coming cannot be construed as an indication that Muslims are just a different sort of Christian. We do not accept the modern Christian conception of who the Messiah is. Instead, we look for the Messiah of the Holy Quran and the Old Testament, who was proclaimed by Gabriel: a light to

enlighten the Gentiles, the glory of the people of Israel, and the King of the children of Jacob.

I am concerned that Christians who demand that Jesus be God Incarnate or who redefine Messiah to fit that interpretation are rejecting who he truly was. According to 1 John 2:22, this is the mark of the Anti-Christ. **“Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son.”** I also worry that by worshiping Jesus as God, some if not all Christians are offending against the first of the Ten Commandments: **“Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me.”** Lastly, I fear that in saying that they are taught these things by God’s Holy Spirit, Christians may be committing the one unforgivable sin recorded in the Bible, that of bearing false witness against the Holy Spirit. Matthew 12:30-32 says: **“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”**

John warns: **“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God”**, in 1 John 4:1-3. Before I began my study, I believed that the Bible denounced anyone who denied that Jesus was God, because of verses like this one. In the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament, flesh is an image used to describe something outside the realm of the divine. This verse doesn’t say that one should listen to a spirit that teaches Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit will never teach anything in contradiction to what has been said to the Prophets.

Christians reject the Holy Quran because it refutes accepted doctrine, and because of the command at the end of the book of

Revelations not to add anything to what God had already revealed. I have tried to demonstrate why I believe that it is the Church and its doctrines that have actually made additions to God's revealed Word, and to show that it is the Holy Quran, in its call to simple faith and submission to the One God, which has remained true to the lessons and revelations of all of God's Prophets. We cannot coerce God by choosing to believe in promises that He never made. Those promises would make God subservient to our selfishness. To me, Christian doctrine is dangerous because it says that our own beliefs about our relationship to God are more important than the relationship itself.

This is a record of my own journey. One thing that I don't want to do is somehow convince anyone to simply replace one doctrine with another. I hope that this book is useful and interesting to anyone who takes the time to read it, but I believe that everyone has to make their own path to peace with God. The first command spoken to Mohammed (PBUH) was "**IQRA**" which means "**READ!**" I believe that God has given us these books for that purpose, and I encourage everyone to read them voraciously. Read everything that you can find, especially the Torah, Bible and Holy Quran, but read them for yourselves. Pray regularly. Make up your own mind. Count on the help of God. I had coffee with an evangelical Christian missionary, an old friend and my last Bible study leader, to talk about my book. I was interested to see if reading it changed the way he felt about me and my reversion to Islam. It took us a while to actually start to talk easily. This earnest, devoted follower of Jesus was convinced that his sole purpose in ministry was to introduce people to the person of Jesus Christ. He was certain that Jesus' importance in the world was based on his role as a divine, redeeming sacrifice and that the message that Jesus brought, though important, was secondary. When he read Jesus' words in John 14:15: "**If you love me, you will obey what I command**", he said that he saw a command to love Jesus, and a promise that obedience would follow. He said he felt that worshipping Jesus was an inevitable step for anyone who



acknowledged him. He even gave me a book “Building Bridges”, written by the Lebanese Christian missionary Fouad Elias Accad (Navpress LCCN#36968), on how to induct Muslims into this process with quotations from the Holy Quran.

Here I was, sitting across the table from him and telling him that I had somehow reversed this sequence, and that I thought that it was the right thing to do. Eventually we began to talk about what the Bible and the Quran actually said, rather than about our interpretations. In the end, he was more comfortable with me and my chosen path, as well as more aware of the differences and similarities between Islam and Christianity, and he expressed the hope that we could continue a dialogue about what both books said about Jesus. It is likely that he still hopes to change my mind, but the good to me was that we had been able to move beyond talking about the way we disagreed on interpretation into an honest conversation about God’s word.

I became quite uncomfortable when I read the book by Fouad Accad. Pastor Accad identified himself as one who hoped to build bridges between Christianity and Islam. He wrote about the necessity of mutual respect, cultural sensitivity and honesty. Unfortunately, I soon realized that his book typified exactly what I want to avoid in Muslim-Christian dialogue. Although it used many of the same verses as my own manuscript, some of them were altered in a fashion that changed their meaning. When I talked about it with my friend, he pointed out that my own quotes were often quite lengthy, and that if I would paraphrase as well I would be better able to make my point and hold the interest of my reader. I think this would be a mistake. For dialogue to be fruitful, it has to be based on the original message, not our summaries. The omission of portions of verses to guide another person’s interpretation of them can be just another way to lie.

Even with the best of intentions, sometimes a scholar can begin a religious argument with a conclusion already in mind and study only to look for supportive verses to prove their point. The temptation to modify something that is “almost perfect” is understandable. I’ve

shown where I found evidence of this in the Holy Bible. I think that Mr. Accad tried to do the same thing with the Holy Quran. For example, for the meaning of Surah 4: 171, he wrote: *"The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was... the Messenger of God, and His word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him."* In fact, the quote from the Quran actually says: *"O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion, nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not 'Trinity'; desist: it will be better for you, for Allah is One God: Glory be to Him; (far Exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on the earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs."* The Quran then goes on: *"Christ disdaineth not to serve and worship Allah, nor do the angels, those nearest to Allah; those who disdain His worship and are arrogant – He will gather them all together unto Himself (to answer)."* Fouad Accad recommended that his version of the verse be used to convince a Muslim that as God's "Word", Jesus was somehow part of God's essence. In fact, the verse and those following it better transmit the opposite meaning.

Later, he used Surah 5: 47 to justify this sort of re-interpretation and reassure Christians about its validity to Muslims. He translated: *"Let those who follow the Gospel (Christians) judge according to (follow) what God has revealed therein (in the Bible). Evildoers are those that do not base their judgments on God's revelations."* He apparently concluded that this gave Christians permission to alter the Quran to mimic their own interpretation of the Bible. Actually the verse quoted is better translated as saying: *"Let the People of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) those who rebel."* A later verse from the same surah, 5: 68, expands on the meaning by commanding: *"Say: 'O People of the*

*Book! Ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord.' It is the revelation that cometh to thee from thy Lord, that increaseth in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. But sorrow thou not over (these) people without Faith."* And later, 5: 78 says: "*Curses were pronounced on those among the Children of Israel who rejected Faith, by the tongue of David and of Jesus the son of Mary, because they disobeyed and persisted in excesses.*" The Quran does not encourage its own reinterpretation. Instead, these verses condemn anyone who tries to force their own self-serving meanings onto the Words of God in either the Bible or the Quran.

Having read his book, I still believe that Reverend Accad's intent was to build bridges between Islam and Christianity. Unfortunately, instead of promoting dialogue and communication, I suspect that his bridges were only meant to carry information from Christianity to Islam, and were actually designed with the sole purpose of carrying Muslims in the other direction, to an acceptance of Christian doctrine. His book was a series of one-sided arguments that would be useful only if one's purpose were to trick an unsophisticated Muslim into the misinterpretation of the Holy Quran. This cannot result in honest, meaningful communication. There is a hadith that recommends that Muslims not listen to Christian theologians. In it, the Prophet (PBUH) explains that some of what they say is true, but that any truth will be mixed with falsehood. Anyone who listens risks either accepting falsehood with truth, or rejecting truth with falsehood. Those who treat the Quran or the Bible in a disrespectful fashion by altering their meaning to win arguments instead of seeking enlightenment only prove the validity of this hadith and damage their own credibility.

We should all remember the words of Gamaliel in Acts 5:35-39: "**Men of Israel, take care what you do with these men. For before these days Theudas arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him: but he was slain and all who**

followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"

The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) was told in Surah 42: 13-15: *"The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah – that which We have sent by inspiration to thee – and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein; To those who worship other things than Allah, hard is the (way) to which thou callest them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him).*

*"And they became divided only after knowledge reached them – through selfish envy as between themselves. Had it not been for a Word that went forth before from thy Lord, (tending) to a Term appointed, the matter would have been settled between them. But truly those who have inherited the Book after them are in suspicious (disquieting) doubt concerning it.*

*"Now then, for that (reason), call (them to the Faith), and stand steadfast as thou art commanded, nor follow thou their vain desires; but say: 'I believe in the Book which Allah has sent down, and I am commanded to judge justly between you. Allah is our Lord and your Lord; for us (is the responsibility for) our deeds, and for you for your deeds. There is no contention between us and you. Allah will bring us together, and to Him is (our) final goal.'"*

Islam is not a rejection of Jesus, of his teachings, or of the Bible. It is a rejection of false doctrines that go beyond what Jesus said. Muslims try to follow all of God's word with fidelity, cognizant that the Message, being from One God, must itself be in its fundamentals One. Unity of God is the central truth of Islam, and Unity of His

people on earth is one of our goals. In the end, we are left with nothing but Faith and obedience, but these being from God are sufficient.

*“Say: ‘See ye? If (this teaching) be from the Lord, and ye reject it, and a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity (with earlier scripture), and has believed while ye are arrogant, (how unjust ye are!), truly, the Lord guides not a people unjust.’”* (The Holy Quran, Surah 46: 10)

# Glossary

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<i>Apocrypha</i>	Biblical writings that are not considered part of the canon; in some editions of the Bible, they are not included, while in others, they are published in a separate section
<i>apostles</i>	the early followers of Jesus (PBUH) who preached his message, especially his original twelve disciples
<i>Baptist</i>	a diverse group of Christian churches that believe in baptism of believers by immersion in water, at an age when they can profess the faith; they also believe that one attains salvation solely through faith in Jesus Christ, whom they consider to be God incarnate
<i>canon</i>	the set of Biblical books that are considered authoritative
<i>centurion</i>	an officer who commanded a century (a company of about one hundred soldiers) in the Roman army
<i>Dajjal</i>	the anti-Christ; in Islamic teachings, he is a false Messiah who will deceive the people and cause harm to humankind until he is killed by Jesus (PBUH)
<i>Daoist</i>	also known as 'Taoist'; a follower of the religion 'Daoism' (Taoism), which is

	mostly practiced in China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea and by ethnic Chinese in other parts of the world as well
<i>Evangelical</i>	a Protestant Christian movement; Evangelicals believe that Jesus (PBUH) is God incarnate, and that he died on the cross so that the sins of those who believe in him will be forgiven
<i>hadith</i>	a statement or action of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that was remembered and recorded by his Companions and followers
<i>Lutheran</i>	a major branch of Christianity based on the beliefs and practices of Protestant reformer Martin Luther
<i>original sin</i>	the concept in Christian doctrine that human beings are born in a state of sin as a result of the fall of Adam or as part of their nature
<i>Pharisee</i>	a minority school of thought in the Jewish sect that emphasized strict observance of the law revealed to Moses, as well as their related oral traditions
<i>Reformation</i>	a sixteenth century Christian reform movement led by Martin Luther, John Calvin and others who objected to certain practices and doctrines of the Roman Catholic church; as a result of the Reformation, parts of Europe came to be dominated by Protestant churches
<i>surah</i>	chapter of the Quran